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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Adam Kendall Coombs entitled "Remediating Blackness and the Formation of a Black Graphic Historical Novel Tradition." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Amy J. Elias, Major Professor

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Katherine L. Chiles, Benjamin F. Lee

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Remediating Blackness and the Formation of a Black Graphic Historical Novel Tradition

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Adam Kendall Coombs
May 2011

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Abstract

This study attempts to establish the cross-currents of African American literary traditions and an emerging African American graphic novel aesthetic. A close analysis of the visuality foreground in the visual/textual space of the graphic novel will provide insight into how the form of the graphic novel reconciles and revises more traditional textual literary elements. Such motifs and tropes as the visuality of slave portraiture, Gates' trope of the talking book, and the paradox of invisibility/visibility within African American creative registers will be used to highlight the creative tradition inaugurated by the African American graphic novel. Each of these elements generally associated with African American textual production, become central thematic concerns with the graphic work of artists such as Ho Che Anderson, Kyle Baker, Dwayne McDuffie, Roland Laird, Taneshia Laird, and Elihu Bey. From the historical biography of Anderson's *King* and Baker's *Nat Turner,* to the broad history of Laird, Laird, and Bey's *Still I Rise*, and finally within the traditional superhero graphic novel of Dwayne McDuffie's *Icon*, a definite tradition of African American graphic novels emerge. Understanding how these graphic novels associate themselves with, and ultimately revise, the literary aesthetics of African American texts makes possible the fuller examination of African American graphic novels as a specialized literary tradition.

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Introduction

Constructing a Black Graphic Novel Aesthetic

The decision of the Pulitzer committee to award a special prize for Art Spiegelman's two-volume graphic novel *Maus* in 1992 marks a turning point in America's acceptance of the graphic novel as a viable aesthetic form.[1] Earning the Pulitzer validated Spiegelman's work, thrusting it into the public consciousness, legitimizing graphic novels as cultural art forms, and destroying the last vestiges of the restrictive comics code of the 1940s and 1950s. Literary and cultural critics have since been freed to focus scholarly attention upon a medium incorporating both textual and visual discourses, melding these somewhat competing aesthetics into a coherent narrative. Responding to this development, critics have become increasingly interested not only in how graphic novels impact and energize library collections, but also in the aesthetic and narrative challenges faced by "reading" visual and textual narratives concurrently.[2] Theorists such as Stephen Cary and James Bucky Carter adapt graphic novels to develop pedagogical techniques in both the multilingual classroom, and in literacy studies respectively. Stephen Tabachnick locates the reliance on visual images to convey deep narrative importance as a cornerstone trait of the graphic novel, making it a natural choice for contemporary readers already bombarded by constant visual stimulation (2). The graphic novel as a literary form uniquely addresses questions of historicity, cultural hierarchy, and race.

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[1] Rocco Versaci, in his work *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*, places *Maus* at the forefront of historical and cultural developments that have allowed the mainstream acceptance of graphic novels and comics as literature, and it is representative of this trend in recent studies of graphic novels.

[2] The Modern Languages Association published *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen Tabachnick, which can serve as a marker of the integration of graphic novels into academic curriculum. Many of the essays collected by Tabachnick address specific issues concerned with integrating graphic novels into teaching practices. Bence Nanay offers a perspective on the narrative implicit in visual images within the fine arts tradition. Talon and Thompson have conducted a study of how narration is established by the frames of a graphic novel.

Though burgeoning as a field, recent graphic novel studies focus on a myriad of themes and interests. Because the contemporary graphic novel often focuses on issues of history and memory, many critics have cited the potential of the graphic form to foreground the contemporary struggle to maintain viable archives in the age of ever-increasing information. Andreas Huyssen observes a turning to the past instead of a privileging of the future as a unique development in contemporary Western societies.[3] He historicizes this change in perspective, writing that "since the 1980s, it seems, the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts," attributing the rise of memory studies as a clear symptom of this culture phenomena (21). Taking up Huyssen's critical perspective, Tony Venezia has outlined the specific strength of the graphic novel to function as an archive of cultural artifacts, cataloging and utilizing various cultural elements within the confines of the work itself. Moreover, Jared Gardner has identified the ephemerality of newspaper comics as crucial to understanding the competing temporalities of past, present, and future at work in the current moment. According to Gardner, we are "given the tools for the hard work of imagining how past and present, text and image might be brought into meaningful and lasting communication through the formal properties inherent to…the comic form" (794).[4] For these critics, the comic strip not only exists in an ephemeral temporality, given its publication in "the medium that most explicitly reminds us of the already-past nature of our present 'news,'" i.e. newspapers (790) but also reconciles visual and textual narratives. Gardner also demonstrates how graphic novels assume a liminal space as archives of popular culture.

[3] Though Huyssen's observation of contemporary cultural institutions is not a unique formulation, the way in which Huyseen applies this perspective to a reading of new media studies contributes to the underlying interests of this study.

[4] Scott McCloud, writing before Gardner, identified the temporal elements of comic frames, and their ability to visualize changes in time (*Understanding* 94-117).

According to Gardner, "comic writing is the only [medium] capable of allowing the shades of the past to overlap with and speak to the impulses of the present" (799). Tony Venezia considers graphic novels in a similar light when conducting a close reading of Alan Moore's *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, writing that the archival potential of the graphic novel allows the "piecing together of fragments from an imagined future archive" (185).

But the graphic novel also is a genre that can uniquely explore the interrelations within a multitude of otherwise monolithic cultural institutions. Scott McCloud, among other critics, has demonstrated how graphic novels can confront political issues of cultural hierarchy. For McCloud the very genre of the graphic novel brings together the so-called high art found in a museum with the low art utilized by corporate advertising (*Understanding* 140). The cultural collapse of high and low art renders the graphic novel a genre in which multiple visual forms are grafted to one another. Applying a narrative studies perspective to this phenomenon, Hillary Chute argues that the categories of fiction, narrative, and historicity need to be re-examined in light of the emergence of graphic novels (452). She contends that it is precisely the melding of these categories that establishes the graphic novel as a hybrid form of experimentation. What Chute identifies as the narrative experimentation implicit to graphic novels announces the genre's ability to reform the literary canon as well. Rocco Versaci gives a physical description of how graphic novels have revised the stringent definitions of the canon, observing that his collection of graphic novels outnumbers and has supplanted the works of Shakespeare, Milton and Hemingway on his book case (1). Graphic novels reformulate the literary canon as they have become increasingly respected as a genre capable of deep emotional content (Versaci 9). Versaci rightly argues that graphic novels have radically changed the boundaries and definitions of

literature. He also cites Spiegelman's *Maus* as a pivotal work that establishes a new narrative model for considering historicism and the complexities inherent to telling history (83). *Maus* re-figures traditional historical narratives through a meta-fictional awareness that capitulates to changing generational perspectives on the Holocaust. The differing perspectives between second-generation Holocaust survivors and their parents create a rift that the writing of history satisfies through reflection and shared experience (86). Historical graphic novels further ameliorate this divide through the construction of an identity through the insistence of historical recollection (87).[5]

Graphic novels, especially historical graphic novels, offer a unique platform for addressing the concerns of African Americans whose cultural identity has been inherently linked to historical presence (or negation). Specifically, the graphic novel has become increasingly relevant for understanding how race and the legacy of slavery inform the creative work of African American graphic novelists. For these artists, the specific demands and functions of the graphic novel constructs a unique connection between graphic novels and traditional literature. Graphic novels offer a bridge between textual and visual narratives, two crucial genres for African American artists plagued by the legacy of visual representations of race and slavery.[6] From the earliest images of so-called black savages cataloged by painters to the iconic stamps of runaway slaves used in ante-bellum broadsides, visual images have been used to delimit the potential humanity of black slaves in the imaginations of European and early white American audiences. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, black artists and writers, nearly from the beginning of

[5] Versaci cites Felman and Laub's *Testimony : Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, who argue that the destruction of history is linked to the destruction of identity.
[6] Editha Jacobs offers an historical perspective of the changing political and social functions of visual representations of slaves and the institution of slavery.

colonization, have resisted these delimiting images, finding empowerment and liberation through the manipulation of visual discourse. Today, black graphic novelists such as Kyle Baker, Ho Che Anderson, Dwayne McDuffie, and the team of Laird, Laird, and Bey build upon this tradition, piecing together viable narrative devices from the building blocks of predecessor artists, therein constructing a unique black heritage of graphic storytelling. The work of these graphic novelists initiates a unique tradition of storytelling indebted to the underlying themes and motifs of African American literary studies.

This study focuses on the works of the graphic novelists listed above, providing an analysis of an emerging form: the black graphic novel. I demonstrate in these novels a shared process of re-conceptualizing not only the notion of an historical narrative, but specific literary themes and motifs embodied in the genre of the black graphic novel. The works I examine—Anderson's graphic biopic *King*, Baker's *Nat Turner*, Laird, Laird and Bey's *Still I Rise: A Graphic History of African Americans*, and Dwayne McDuffie's[7] *Icon: A Hero's Welcome*—strive to make historical and literary connections with the African American literary and visual arts traditions. Each of these works in some way revises or incorporates the traditions of African American literature. Through their particular relationship to slave portraiture, Gates' famous "trope of the talking book," or the complex aesthetics of racial invisibility, these works establish a specifically black tradition of graphic storytelling, one that becomes increasingly important in a canon thirsty for the hybrid narratives of graphic novels.

The works I have selected sample various genres. *King* and *Nat Turner* recall the popular trend toward graphic biographies; *Still I Rise* offers a graphic historical narrative; and *Icon*

[7] Though Icon is the collaborative product of several artists and writers at Milestone Media, especially McDuffie and M.D. Bright, for the purposes of concision I will refer to McDuffie as the major author.

embodies something of the typical superhero comic book (though this work explicitly inverts the typical racial hierarchy of the genre). I provide a diverse subject matter to argue that though black graphic novels have tended toward historical narratives (a notion I will examine in greater detail in Chapter Three), the inclusion of *Icon* shows that the aesthetic and cultural relationships between black graphic novels and their literary counterparts can be applied to a variety of graphic novel genres.

Current critics of African American literature have considered specific elements of black graphic novels and taken stock of recent trends in analyzing these novels. The work of Michael Chaney, for example, is crucial to understanding how scholars have begun to consider not only the impact of a burgeoning oeuvre of black graphic novelists, but also the aesthetic elements and concerns unique to these artists. Chaney argues that a range of black graphic novelists "thematize what Hayden White locates as the burden of history within the particular registers of an African American context and milieu" (History 175). For Chaney, the graphic novels of Ho Anderson, Aaron McGruder, and Kyle Baker seize the process of signification particular to historical records as a means of re-fashioning the historical narrative itself, thereby activating the political potential of the genre outlined by Gardner (Chaney 182). Chaney's later monograph *Fugitive Vision* considers the visual representations of slavery from Frederick Douglass' autobiography to William Wells Brown's exhibitionism at the Crystal Palace. Thus, Chaney's research implies a connection between the historic tradition of visually depicting black bodies and their contemporary equivalents in black graphic novels. This study connects historic and literary traditions of African American artists to the work of current graphic novels. Whereas Chaney's critical oeuvre implies a connection between the historic visual traditions of African Americans

and the historical narratives produced by black graphic novels, this study explicitly establishes this connection. It also attempts to incorporate the insights of critics such as Rachel Wilson, who has cited the recent emergence of a plethora of what she terms "multicultural graphic novels" as representing a growing awareness and interest in developing forms of graphic storytelling specific to ethnic and social contexts.[8] In a recent contribution to *History: Reviews of New Books,* Dwain Pruitt cites a growing body of scholarship on race and ethnicity in comics and graphic novels.[9] Interestingly, each of the works reviewed by Pruitt is essentially a biography of current or former graphic novelists or cartoonists. Though gesturing toward literary studies, Pruitt dismisses the potential progression of graphic novel scholarship by noting that these works "add both texture and nuance to comic-related scholarship and should appeal to *general* audiences" (emphasis added 47). Serious literary and cultural critics, in Pruitt's estimation, are not advanced through the works under review. Substantial work then remains for scholars to answer Pruitt's challenge and perform detailed analyses of specific trends within graphic novels, especially the work of black graphic novelists. As noted above, the work of Michael Chaney begins to do this, as does the work of Marc Singer, who outlines the ambivalent attitude of the comics genre to constructing racial stereotypes (107).[10]

Few critics have acknowledged specific aesthetic traits, or even the existence, of African American graphic novels. Yet while comprehensive scholarship and full studies devoted to black

[8] Wilson's work is more immediately concerned with understanding the potential of multicultural graphic novels to expand student's understanding and exposure to cultures other than their own, but does provide evidence of the growing body of graphic novels centered on non-mainstream cultures.
[9] Pruitt credits the work of Arie Kaplan, Mark Evanier, and Nancy Goldstein with contributing to the growing critical interest in issues of ethnicity and race within the genre of graphic novels.
[10] Singer's work is specifically concerned with the superhero genre of comics and their use of stereotyped images of race.

graphic novels are particularly limited, some critics have examined the specific works cited in this study. William H. Foster has collected his essays and interviews concerning African American graphic novels and comics, citing the work of Milestone Media as a "phenomenon in the history of comic books" (79).[11] Jeffrey Brown then performs a socio-cultural analysis of Milestone comics in his monograph *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and their Fans*. Brown's work performs a now typical examination of the subculture that surrounds comic books, specifically Milestone Comics as the only black-owned comic book company to find mainstream success. However, Brown is limited by a decidedly sociological approach that focuses on observing and taking part in the cultural practices that accompany the graphic novel itself. My study focuses instead on providing a scholarly perspective of the racial dimensions functioning within the pages of the novel. Already operating within this framework, Jennifer Ryan provides a cogent analysis of *Icon*, a product of Milestone Comics, arguing that Icon's sidekick Raquel authorizes Icon's narrative, assuming an authorial place as the originator of Icon's heroic exploits.[12] In reference to the other works, Rebecca Wanzo examines how Kyle Baker considers the invisibility of military contributions by black figures in the historical record through a close reading of his graphic novel *Truth: Red, White, and Black*. Baker, she argues, revises the popular image of Captain America, constructing the character Isaiah Bradley to reveal the unacknowledged sacrifices black soldiers, especially the victims of the Tuskegee experiments, to American military prowess (340). This study combines and pushes against the narrative and

[11] Milestone Media is the publisher of McDuffie's *Icon: A Hero's Welcome.* One of the contributions collected in *Looking for a Face Like Mine* is Foster's necessarily brief anthology of mainstream black characters featured in either comic books or graphic novels. His edited transcript, "Do We Still Have to be Black," mentions a forthcoming project, "Finally in Full Color," that has yet to materialize.

[12] The nuances of Ryan's argument will be discussed at length in a later chapter, the above is meant as a summary of current scholarship concerning the subject works of this study.

historical elements cited by these critics, positioning these perspectives within a larger framework of black graphic novels generally.

Over the course of this study, I will illustrate how the graphic novelists under consideration establish a tradition of graphic storytelling informed by and specific to the cultural and historical legacies of North American racism and slavery. Ultimately, I will argue that each of these works contributes to a process of signification, or "black difference," manifesting itself in African American literature (Gates xxii-iii). Through a graphic use of the process of Signifyin', black graphic novelists manifest the traits of their literary and cultural predecessors while fashioning a hybrid media that operates both visual and textual discourses. By analyzing specific instances of this signifying process, I argue that we can understand what constitutes the difference of black graphic novels.

Some scholars have demonstrated an ambivalence concerning the label "black graphic novels," (as differentiated from otherwise mainstream graphic novels).[13] Through understanding the specific moments of signifying within these works, however, we can better understand how black graphic novelists situate their own work in relation to that of their peers and literary antecedents. Specifically, this study will first examine how these works remediate the visual legacy of slavery in graphic representations of both contemporary and historical figures. Also, this study analyzes how works such as Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* likewise remediate and respond to Gates' "trope of the talking book," fashioning this theoretical concern into a viable political discourse on revolution. Invisibility, as an aesthetic concern of African American artists, is also of interest as perhaps the most widely recognized trope of African American literary theory.

[13] Michael Chaney's contribution to *Teaching the Graphic Novel* assumes such an ambivalent perspective, one that will be interrogated over the course of this study,

Chapter One, "From Paratext to Remediation: Slave Portraiture and the Black Graphic Novel," foregrounds Gerard Genette's theory of the "paratext" to illustrate how black graphic novels invoke the visual tropes of slave portraiture. Through their use of framing and interest in faces, *King*, *Nat Turner*, and to a lesser extent *Still I Rise* embody Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation by integrating the visual forms of slave portraiture while also acknowledging Genette's paratext. This chapter cites Chaney's interest in Frederick Douglass' portrait as representative of the political and aesthetic potential inherent in manipulating visual images of black authors. Through remediation, black graphic novelists demonstrate a concern with the history of slavery in their focus on slave portraits, while also revising the traditional rhetorical function of these visual images. Whereas Douglass and Genette would consider Douglass' portrait as a "paratext," existing outside the immediate experience of the text itself, black graphic novels incorporate the paratext into the text, breaking inside/outside hierarchies, undermining the traditional signification of slave portraiture, and marshalling the portrait to serve the ends of both narrative and critique. Through this remediation black graphic novelists re-situate the visual portrait, incorporating this image within a pointed political discourse.

Chapter Two, "Refiguring the 'Talking Book' as a Visual Discourse through the Logic of Remediation," addresses how black graphic novels incorporate one of the popular theories of African American literature, Henry Louis Gates' "trope of the talking book." By uncovering the relationship between Gates' theory and the works of Baker and McDuffie, this chapter demonstrates how issues of literacy become important aesthetic concerns for black graphic novels. Though obviously circumventing the task of "reading" a text through the use of visual images, black graphic novels undermine the privileging of forms of literacy coded "white"

through an insistence on images as complex narrative tools. Visuality emerges in these works as a counter to the racial hierarchy maintained by textuality in Gates' trope. Kyle Baker, in particular, utilizes visual images almost exclusively in his narrative, thereby undercutting a privileging of white forms of literacy. The book itself, rather than an implied author or narrator, "speaks," remediating and embodying the trope of the talking book on a formal dimension. Also, within Baker's and McDuffie's narratives, reading assumes a central political place as a means of resisting racial hegemony and articulating a specifically black identity. Thus, visual images become subversive political and narrative tools for the formulation of a black graphic aesthetic responding to the limitations of white forms of literacy.

Chapter Three, "Self-determined (in)visibility," connects the work of black graphic novels to the underlying aesthetic, political, and social concerns described by the theory of invisibility. I apply Ralph Ellison's seminal work on invisibility as constituting a cultural and social theory to understanding the pre-occupation with historical narratives common to each of the works under consideration. I argue that this fascination with re-creating the stories of historical figures, and gaining control of the historical narrative itself (as evident in *Still I Rise*), demonstrates a concern with being erased from memory assumed by the theory of invisibility. The works under consideration demonstrate a revision of this theory through not only their insistence on visual forms of expression (thereby making the invisible visible) but also their interest in historical narratives. Ultimately I assert that the process of signification describes much of the revisionist work performed by the graphic novels used in this study. Through their "repetition with a difference," graphic novels define some of the underlying characteristics shared by the growing canon of African American graphic novels.

Chapter 1

From Paratext to Remediation: Slave Portraiture and the Black Graphic Novel

This chapter focuses on connections between antebellum slave portraiture and contemporary black graphic novels. Current critics of the traditions of slave portraiture have approached the visuality of portraiture from slightly different trajectories. Lynn Casmier-Paz invokes Gerard Genette's theory of the "paratext" to demonstrate the rhetorical function of these images within the confines of a larger textual narrative. Additionally, Michael Chaney has analyzed Frederick Douglass' manipulation of his own visual representation in order to align Douglass' narrative with concomitant abolitionist discourse. However, these theories are unable to account for the specific aesthetics embodied by graphic novels, and their use of slave portraiture. The graphic novels of Anderson and Baker especially demonstrate visual strategies of appropriation described by Bolter and Grusin's notion of remediation. In essence, graphic novels remediate the visual traits and rhetorical function of portraiture by integrating portraiture as a narrative element within the visual and textual language of graphic novels. Instead of existing as a paratext, the signifying language of slave portraiture is remediated within black graphic novels, marshalling this discursive instrument toward narrative ends. Thus black graphic novels are imbricated in a process of commentary and revision of the visual genre of portraiture itself. By importing the visual language of slave portraiture, black graphic novels adapt the identity politics and visual tropes outlined by the genre, thereby formulating a new hybrid tradition dependent on both the old and new forms.

Understanding how publishers of slave narratives use textual and visual elements together illuminates how current graphic novels revise these traits in their own aesthetic mode. Many

former slaves both in America and Britain were keenly aware of the importance their visual representation had for a readership clamoring for the latest tales of captivity and glimpses into the physical world of that "peculiar institution." Captivity narratives, especially the genre of slave narratives, fascinated and appalled readers in the 18th and 19th centuries and became thrilling entertainment as well as the basis of pointed political discourse. Whereas the dangerous and harrowing adventures of particular writers fascinated the typical reader, abolitionists championed slave narratives as an expose of the deplorable state of humanity with the slave system. Portraits of the slave-turned-writer were crucial to the abolitionist appeal of slave narratives for they revealed the writer's mastery of his own image and therefore identity.

During the antebellum period in America many abolitionists published slave narratives as a means of furthering their own political agenda. Portraiture was a crucial element of this process, as the emerging technology of photography offered a physical testament to the physical abuses of slavery. Publishers of slave narratives included images of the slave/author within the opening pages of a narrative, thereby underscoring the authenticity of the following account. Given the de jure prohibition against educating slaves, a feeling supported by the de facto policies of Jim Crow laws, the notion of a literate black person became a powerful symbol for the abolitionist struggle. Slave narratives and the evidence of education through writing established humanity for the slave-author. As Davis and Gates note, "the slave narrative represents the attempts of black [writers] to *write themselves into being*" (orig. emphasis xxiii). The portrait accompaniments to these narratives then served to illustrate and give human face to the writer. In addition, portraits certified the veracity of the narrative. For Frederick Douglas and Olaudah Equiano in particular, visual images certified their own literacy and humanity. Vincent Carretta has identified Equiano's

pluralistic identities represented through the frontispiece image of "an indisputably African body in European dress," a plurality made exponentially more complex due to his dubious national origin (xix).[14] Though intersected by various publication and political concerns, slave portraits assumed an essential position in both the reception and reading of slave narratives.

Many critics have focused on the literary significance and function of portraiture in slave narratives. Lynn Casmier-Paz outlines the rhetorical place and function of slave portraiture as both a testament to the truth of the following narrative and "the initial 'threshold' through which the overarching irony of the writing slave is readable" (92).[15] For Casmier-Paz, the portrait assumes a place outside the narrative proper and provides evidence for claims of authorship, while also valorizing the experience of the individual writer. Henry Louis Gates Jr. takes a divergent view, arguing that slave portraiture conflates black identity to a physical commodity, something that can be bought and sold. Though more concerned with Olaudah Equiano's experience of the "Talking Book," Gates writes, "Equiano, the slave, enjoys a status identical to that of the watch, the portrait, and the book. He is the master's object, to be used and enjoyed, purchased, sold, or discarded, just like a watch, a portrait or a book" (156). For Gates, Equiano is a commodity, akin to a portrait bought and sold by white owners. Gates' use of the metaphorical portrait is particularly striking because it illustrates a concurrent discourse of commodification at work not only on the level of black identity, but also within the construction of black portraiture. Images of slaves in the early years of photography and growing mass market publication were themselves

[14] Vincent Carretta has raised doubts concerning Equiano's claimed African origin, and recent discoveries that support an American origin. What pertains most directly to this study is Equiano's attempt to fashion a definite identity through the use of visual portraiture.

[15] Casmier-Paz cites French literary and cultural critic Gerard Genette who describes "paratexts," or anterior elements of the narrative itself, as a "threshold" or vestibule outside of the text (Genette 1-2).

artifacts of the racist and essentialist gaze of an American culture uneasy with notions of black subjectivity and independence.[16]

Negotiating the process of commodification within portraiture, however, black writers could unlock the political potential within visual representation. Michael Chaney identifies precisely this dimension, by outlining the abolitionist functions of slave portraiture. In *Fugitive Vision,*[17] Chaney describes how slaves' and ex-slaves' manipulation of visual imagery is part of the African American tradition of "'putt'in on Ole Massa,' of doing a better job of being the master by pulling on the master's mask and seeing the world through his eyes" (2). For Chaney, slave portraiture resists racist appropriation. By adopting the visual instruments hitherto dominated by white-supremacist institutions, slave portraiture mimics the traditions of photographic portraiture if only to disrupt the racial hierarchy implicit in its gaze.[18] Portraits in slave narratives made a claim for individual identity. Emerging from this tradition is Frederick Douglass, who subverts the implicitly racist gaze of the photograph to position his own identity in opposition to prevailing prejudice. Frederick Douglass' narrative foregrounds the process through which former slaves were able to manipulate their own portraits.

Chaney and Casmier-Paz have set up a rich field for scholars to investigate the interplay of portraiture and textual representation. By putting this work on portraiture together with new

[16] The articles of Lynn Casmier-Paz, P. Gabrielle Foreman, and Sarah Blackwood, along with Michael Chaney's *Fugitive Vision*, are at the forefront of discussions of the "stamping" effect of imagery of escaped slaves in early American publications.

[17] *Fugitive Vision* concerns itself with how visual imagery impacts a range of early black figures, and does not focus exclusively on slave narratives. Instead, it analyzes visual and textual intersections of blackness from the literary mode of narratives, to the cosmopolitan delight in exhibiting so-called samples of black masculinity.

[18] Chaney is especially concerned with the overlying historical and social discourse hastened by contemporary interest in natural sciences and the racializing theories of phrenology. His argument is especially interested in how Douglass recalls a visual remembrance of his mother by citing an image of King Tut featured in one of the natural history books he used to sharpen his vocabulary.

investigations of the African American graphic novel, one can see that black graphic novels re-situate slave portraiture, as a functional part of the narrative. "Remediation" describes how the graphic novel internalizes, at the level of form, the use of visual elements in the manner of slave narratives. According to Bolter and Grusin, remediation is defined as the representation of one medium in another (45). Rather than putting portraits at the beginning of a narrative graphic novels incorporate slave portraiture into the narrative itself, thereby "absorb[ing] the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized" (47).

Genette's emphasis on the location of a paratext is especially pertinent for understanding how black graphic novelists approach the paratextual element of slave portraiture, revising its liminal status in order to thread portraiture into the very fabric of the narrative itself. What for Genette is liminal and dialectically defined in relation to the text, I argue, is initiated into the zone of textual figuration for black graphic novels, becoming a part of what it once helped define. The identity politics of slave portraiture, then, are transmitted into the textual work, no longer liminal, but interwoven into the narrative.

Black graphic novels respond to the tradition of slave portraiture by assuming a level of control and power akin to some of the emergent voices of early slave narratives. This assertion is especially pertinent for understanding how black graphic novels assume the master's gaze, thereby operating a visual and textual discourse that functions outside the white hegemonic institutions of discourse. It is this hybrid discourse, maintained by black graphic novels, that seizes ownership of conceptions of portraiture in order to topple the traditional stereotypes and essentialist images of black leaders hereto maintained by the exclusionary practices of a white-dominated historical record. Sarah Blackwood observes that "Frederick Douglass and Harriet

Jacobs were asking penetrating questions about the relationship between the truth of the image and the truth required of their textual testimony" (96). For Blackwood, these writers employed the descriptive language of photography in their textual narratives as a moment of resistance. Given the implied truthfulness of the genre of slave narratives, especially as concerned the white abolitionists who published such narratives, Douglass and Jacobs negotiated the mimetic expectations of their narratives with their own desire to reveal the dehumanization of slavery. Blackwood describes the competing concerns of photography and their narratives:

> The mimetic function of the slave narrative was, like the photograph, both foreclosing and liberating. It was liberating to speak the truth, to show slavery as it was, even while this truth could never really be accurately captured within the frame of any narrative or photograph (96).

Antebellum audiences traditionally "read" the image of the slave as an essential representation of the black subjectivity assumed to be contained in the pages of the narrative. Douglass and Jacobs, however, marshaled both the textual and visual elements of their narratives in order to overturn notions of truth or essential identity. The writer remains visible and invisible, understood and also impossible to fully understand, via a hybrid discourse that mirrors the interplay of text and visual at work in current black graphic novels.

Readers' expectations of truth and objectivity within experiential depictions of slavery have long troubled and concerned critics of African American literature. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Charles Davis articulate and challenge these assumptions in their collection of essays *The Slave's Narrative*. In their introduction, "The Language of Slavery," Gates and Davis acknowledge that any literary claim to faithful representation of "historical reality" is suspect, be

it in the literature of slave or master (xi). They find, to use Blackwood's conception, that the mimetic function of slave narratives denotes a vast difference in how slave narratives are approached as documentary literature. Slave narratives cannot be judged as perfect recollections of experience presenting an ostensible "truth." Instead, that truth is inherently subjective and limited (xi). Thus, the slave narrative genre is mired in issues of accurate and truthful representation, issues originating in the very limitations of language that require, Blackwood and Chaney would argue, the photographic and visual accompaniments that operate as the paratextual function outlined by Casmier-Paz.

Biographical graphic novels further complicate the problem of "truth" formulated in the slave narrative genre. These graphic novels further interrogate the relationship between the paratext of the portrait and the body of the narrative to illustrate how a continual reliance on visual images to tell a story further complicates an understanding of truth. A visual image, especially a portrait, provides insight into notions of truth as the image itself implicitly suggests a level of mimesis. Photographs and paintings of individuals are assumed to be accurate representations and reproductions of the subject. Anderson's *King*, Baker's *Nat Turner*, and Laird, Laird, and Bey's *Still I Rise* are therefore useful works for establishing and understanding how graphic novels internalize the slave narrative's implicit ambivalence toward historical fact, fashioning a narrative that mediates both text and image. Ultimately, I argue, the graphic novel utilizes the language and visual presentation of portraiture as a means of articulating the myriad discourses that complicate readings of truth, a central concern of the slave narrative.

Before considering the intersections of slave portraiture and graphic novels as either paratext or remediation, it is necessary to first establish the theoretical tenets of both theories. For

Genette, the paratext encompasses all of the ancillary publication elements of a text meant to promote a proper reading of the text itself. According to Genette, a text "is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions" (1). Instead, paratextual elements, such as a title, preface, illustration, or introduction "surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it" (orig. emphasis 1). Thus, a paratext provides a paradigm for reading the text itself, just as a critical introduction identifies some of the overarching themes and interests within a piece of canonical literature. The usual examples, though not extensive, that Genette offers of the paratext are such elements as epigraphs, dedications, prefaces, titles, elements that mediate the temporal and figural space between parallel realms of publishing and the text itself (Macksey xvii). As Casmier-Paz has observed, the paratext "enables a text to become a book," and underwrites a legitimating function within the text itself (Genette 1). Moreover, paratexts exist in order to establish credibility for the text. Casmier-Paz emphasizes on this characteristic, arguing that slave portraiture functions to provide evidence of the credibility of the following narrative (92). The separation between text and paratext allows the paratext to comment on the text. Genette ascribes a definite location to the paratext, arguing that the legitimating function of a paratext can only be accomplished if the paratext is situated in relation to the text itself; the paratext must assume a respectful distance to the text itself (4). By definition the paratext is physically separated from the text, because through this distance the paratext accomplishes its function as paradigmatic construction.

Remediation, however, describes the process of inserting one media into another media. The critical distance maintained by the paratext collapses, as media become more intimately integrated into one another. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have established the dimensions

of this theory, especially as concerns the burgeoning field of computer media. According to their theory, "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). As new media are formulated they incorporate older media, expanding or improving the older media as the signs of this incorporation are rendered invisible. To demonstrate this practice Bolter and Grusin offer webcams embedded into websites, offering a twenty-four hour view of the weather conditions for a given mountain range (6). In this example the new media, the internet, has supplanted the older media, video recording; improving on this media through the multiple interfaces afforded by the web browser. Users are not limited to watching only the video feed itself, but are able to interact with the other features of the site while maintaining their connection to the video through the process of remediation. According to what they term the "logic of immediacy," the "medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop" (6).

Yet the immediacy constructed by an embedded webcam describes only one of a range of embodiments within the process of remediation. Bolter and Grusin describe remediation as incorporating media in several ways: hypermedia in which multiple media collide and inundate the user's experience, transparency where an older media is represented seamlessly, and remediation with an emphasis on improving older media (digital encyclopedia's offer images, video, and searching) (45). Though Bolter and Grusin, writing in 1999, analyze the remediation enacted by computer games, digital photography, photorealistic graphics, digital art, and film, their work falls short of considering graphic novels. Yet, Graphic novels remediate visual and textual storytelling, as each media remediates the other. While this construction stretches the

boundaries of Bolter and Grusin's definition, it does point to the potential for graphic novels to remediate other media and traditions. The already hybrid nature of graphic novels positions the medium within the genre-bending implied by Bolter and Grusin's theory.

One such example of the process of remediation working within graphic novels is demonstrated in *King*, by African-Canadian graphic novelist Ho Che Anderson, whom Scott McCloud has cited as part of an emerging contingent of independent creators who seek to tear down the stereotypical images of black characters (108). From its inception, Anderson's *King* seeks to grapple with the complex image of Martin Luther King, an iconic figure in Civil Rights history and popular culture. The novel opens with a brief segment depicting King's childhood, then quickly moves forward to his time at Boston University. All of the major civil rights efforts led by King are depicted. From the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Anderson presents the public and private side of Martin Luther King. Writing the introduction for the collected volume of Anderson's novel, Stanley Crouch cogently observes the varied forms that King's image has taken in "our technological time," one that "measure[s] how important the meaning of a person is…by how many places in our communication network acknowledge the existence of the person" (9). Crouch identifies the many forms visual representations of King have taken, from posters to paintings, sculptures and "the voodoo dolls of vulgar representation that are part of the doom of all great men in a commercial culture of souvenirs" (9). Anderson's *King* is likewise a montage of visual depictions of the fallen leader. King is depicted as sometimes the shackled servant of the Church (14-5), suave lady's man (28), non-violence advocate (50), or martyred hero (229). Portraits of King are central to presenting

Anderson's preoccupation with how images of King have become lodged in the American cultural psyche, demonstrating the possibilities and implications of using portraits as a narrative device.

Through visual depictions of King, Anderson maintains an ongoing examination of King's relationship with his own faith. From nearly the beginning of the narrative we are exposed to the inherent link Christianity, specifically as seen in the metonym of the cross worn around King's neck, has to King's identity (14; see figure 1.1). Opening on what we later learn is a typical day in King's life while a student at Boston University in 1952, the first image of King features a shadowy cross with a chain hanging from it, and passes through the dark outline of King's figure as the lyrics to a Nat King Cole song pass over the entire frame. The low angle of this first frame creates a telling juxtaposition as the cross looms over the diminutive King. The chain (what later images reveal to be a saint's medal) hangs from an ominous cross, connecting the body of King to the dark image of the cross. Though a traditional icon of Christian hope and faith, the shadowy cross here seems more menacing, emphasized by the paradox of Cole's inexorable cheeriness as he announces he "just found joy" (14). King seems to reject Cole's merriment, and the scene evokes a scene of resignation and ambivalence to the life that King's faith has established. The second frame moves above the cross, revealing its limited size, while also emphasizing King's troubled relationship to the faith represented by the cross and medal. Discarded along with the daily trappings of keys and loose change, the cross and medal assume an ancillary position to King's thoughts. King literally puts on his faith in the morning as part of his daily ritual, and discards it at night along with the contents of his pockets.

Depicting the famed Montgomery Bus Boycott, Anderson includes a photographic representation of the citizens of Montgomery followed by a portrait (48-49; see figure 1.2) of the

civil rights leader. The latter frame recalls the basic visual format of portraiture: an interest in portraying the facial expressions of the subject, placing the subject in relation to significant objects,[19] and framing that establishes a contained temporal space (one reads portraits as a self-contained work). Anderson's remediation of portraiture utilizes these traits but also revises the basic assumptions of these traits, specifically the contained narrative space. Anderson's portraits of King maintain the definitive characteristics of portraiture through a focused interest on King's facial features and profile, while inserting these portraits into a larger narrative. Portraits of King become part of the ongoing biography, itself something of an extended portrait in that it attempts to portray intimate details of the man's life.

The first true portrait of King shows him preaching to the assembled masses of Montgomery, near pictures (one on the opposite page) of grainy, black-and-white photographs of the event crowds taken from historical records. The photographs depict the crowds of Montgomery citizens who have descended upon Holt Street Baptist Church to discuss the possibility of a formal boycott of city buses in support of the famous stand against segregation made by Rosa Parks. The people are crammed together, their anxious and restless faces obscured by the gritty quality of the image. This image is particularly interesting because Anderson remediates this image, in that he places one media (photography) into another (the graphic novel). While there are frames that set the photograph apart from the surrounding images, these frames are used throughout the novel and graphic novels in general to draw distinctions and boundaries between one image and the next. The boundaries of these frames describe the narrative position of the images, revealing the linked narrative implicit to their sequential progression. By interrupting

[19] The portrait of King on 49 especially echoes the classic portrait style employed by Equiano's portrait, whose hands clutch a Bible and a globe signifying Equiano's emerging knowledge and announcing his status to the world.

the progression of drawn images with a photograph, Anderson's remediation of photography establishes the parameters for his subsequent remediation of portraiture. The photograph embodies the immediacy of remediation as the media of photograph becomes integrated seamlessly into the media of the graphic novel.

The portrait of King that follows the photograph follows the same logic of remediation, while also instilling a deepened sense of the psychic forces competing within King's consciousness. Drawn in black and white and in stark contrast to the realism of the photographs, the drawing makes King the center focus, but also indicates three lay leaders seated in the chancel behind him; the picture takes up the entire page. The picture angle looks down upon the civil rights leader from above, as from the angle of a camera above his head or on the ceiling of the church hall, the angle from which God Himself might be viewing the scene. King stands looking up at the "camera," as if addressing the Almighty. The poverty of the church is indicated by its wooden plank floors, everyday wood chairs, and plain wooden pulpit. A black shadow bisects King's face, going from the top left corner of his forehead to the lower right side of his cheeks. This image conveys the melodrama as well as the seriousness of the 1955 city-wide boycott of Montgomery buses. While the first two-thirds of the novel are almost entirely black-and-white drawings, the uses of contrast here demonstrate the defiant resistance King advocates in his speech, and gestures toward the looming uncertainty literally tearing his soul in two divergent directions.

The visual representation of King, his upward gaze and shadowed face, are crucial elements to understanding the overall message of the graphic novel. The portraiture of this frame adds an element of narrative complexity to the novel, not simply acting as mimetic representation

of the unfolding events. Rather, as Jan Baeten's argues, this graphic novel embraces the visual as an independent narrative construction, one that furthers the storytelling beyond the constriction of the words on the page (80). The portrait aesthetics frame King's inclusion in what Anderson terms a protest against reductive and simplistic readings of visual images as storytelling apparatus (10). Anderson's reflections are particularly relevant as they illuminate the politics of the complex aesthetics inscribed in *King.* Anderson writes, "My problem was to make a compelling visual narrative out of a cartoon book. Cartoons were never intended for nuance and all that…But this is part of my protest against that" (10). While perhaps the genre of cartoons were not meant for detailed visual storytelling, the genre of portraits have long been a critical genre for understanding nuances of personal identity, especially as concerns African American writers and artists. Just as Frederick Douglass' manipulation of his own portrait belies a political strategy of authentication (Chaney *Fugitive* 26), likewise, Anderson's manipulation of King's portrait complicates the overly heroic or nostalgic images of the fallen hero that have become lodged in the imagination of American popular culture. By furthering this tradition, Anderson participates in an aesthetic tradition inscribed in the very history of African American literature, in a sense "illuminating" the narrative complexities of both works.

Thus, the visual portrait of King in Anderson's biographical graphic novel offers another form of narrative "truth," in the same way that antebellum African American writers, such as Douglass, understood the role of early photography as a truth-telling instrument. Anderson likewise rejects the limiting category of mimetic "truth" that Blackwood ascribes to the portraits of Douglass and Jacobs. In the illustration on page 153 of *King* that marks the original split between books two and three of the original three-part series of Anderson's work, there is an

unattributed quotation that crystallizes Anderson's political aims in the novel. Set in white type, over the bloodstained red stripes of an American flag, are the words "Truth or Myth—None of that matters. All that matters is the legacy" (153; see figure 1.3). This epigram announces a rejection of the mimetic function of the biographical work Anderson has pursued. The epigram clarifies, had there been any doubt, the pre-occupation of this graphic novel with examining and interrogating the popular image of Martin Luther King Jr. and his legacy. This quotation reminds the reader that the image of King that has thus far dominated one hundred fifty pages, and will continue for another eighty-six, rejects truth and myth, focusing instead on King's cultural legacy. In the third moment where the narrator steps back from the novel itself—the set-up for part one and the transition between two and three marking the others—this description carries enormous weight for understanding how the novel is to be understood as a whole.

King's insistence on legacy as the driving narrative concern for a graphic biography further subverts the mimetic function of (auto)biography. In the above epigram Anderson articulates the ethical dilemma Blackwood ascribes to writers of slave narratives and their photographic counterparts. By insisting on a reading of legacy, Anderson undercuts expectations of truthful depictions as well as romanticized notions of King as a strategy to foreground, instead, the multimedia images of King that exists, as Crouch describes, within popular culture on a multitude of levels (9). In this rendering, Anderson empowers his own portrait of King to exist within a narrative that sustains an interest in considering how a post-modern world is to understand a leader that exists now in a fractured visual imaginary. Thus, Anderson's narrative demonstrates an awareness of the mimetic expectation of truth Blackwood reads onto the slave narrative, actively empowering this reading to fashion a narrative that documents the lingering

elements of King's identity and ideas in a culture then thirty years removed from his assassination. Anderson's novel can be read as an invented portrait of one of the most well-known civil rights leaders in history. By returning to some of the pivotal scenes and historical photographs that record and preserve the work of King, and transferring these into a graphic novel, Anderson demonstrates how the graphic novel itself makes interior that which was exterior or "paratextual" in early narratives of slavery.

The above quotation foregrounding issues of legacy is significant to understanding the formal visual paradigm that becomes refigured within Anderson's novel. Crouch makes the reader aware of this transition, remarking that "the last third of the book," is "when the characters appear to be totemic, standing or striding in a world now completely mythical, the land of dreams and tragic finality" (11). Anderson's portrait aesthetic, the melding of photographs and art deco-inspired renderings of human form, in this section is markedly more colorful and immediate, as if in touching the pages, smudges of blue and yellow will stain a reader's fingers. Much has been written about the historical revision and re-imagining enacted by Anderson's novel.[20] However, I would like to argue that Anderson's novel, particularly the "mythical" final third, utilizes a multimodal portrait aesthetic to consider the constructed nature of King's image in popular culture and allow Anderson to conceptualize and depict the parallel concerns with photography and the individual black body abundantly apparent in early slave narratives.

[20] Michael Chaney, in a *MELUS* article titled "Drawing on History in Recent African American Graphic Novels," articulates how Anderson's work demonstrates the narrativity of historical records described by Hayden White. Chaney argues that Anderson's novel negotiates the competing claims of public memory and private experience foregrounded in recollections of Martin Luther King, Jr. (189).

To demonstrate, I focus on a portrait of King that exists within the mythic landscape Crouch identifies in the latter third of the novel. Anderson's depiction of King's final public speech, what has popularly been termed the "I've Been to the Mountaintop Speech," remediates the language and visual iconography of film to demonstrate King's multimedia legacy. But it also illustrates how visual imagery operates within, as well as against, the tradition of slave portraiture. King's final speech begins with an establishing frame reminiscent of the rouken figure in Caspar David Friedrich's famous Romantic painting "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog," a lighting technique that draws the reader's attention to King's broad shoulders (217). Anderson uses the intense spotlights that dominate the stage to make King's entire person seem elevated, nearly heavenly. The mood established in this depiction is eerie considering that even the most casual reader would be aware that this is King's final speech, the last public words he utters before an assassination makes him a martyr. The next three successive frames focus on King's face, finally coming to rest on his eyes, which reflect the glare that seems to encapsulate his entire person (218-9). By depicting King in a mostly gray color scheme and using the angles seen in each frame, Anderson alludes to the video of King's speech. This allusion is made more concrete by the visual depiction of lighting, which in the front views of King mirror the sweat easily observed coursing down King's face as he delivers his speech (*Eyes 2*). In this way, the reader is not simply exposed to a graphic illustration of King's speech, but rather a graphic illustration of a filmic documentation of an historical event.

A key detail in understanding Anderson's indebtedness to film is the ABC logo affixed to one of the microphones assembled at the top of the podium, in the art deco-inspired vision of King in this scene (218; see figure 1.4). The placement of this logo, in nearly the center of the

frame, draws the reader's attention, as it is the only rigidly defined text, or even shape, in the frame. This iconography calls attention to the video archive of this particular vision of King, thereby re-enforcing concerns about portrait imagery and racial identity. King's 1968 speech was captured live by at least one camera and, as the frame makes clear, a plethora of microphones. Thus, King's words, and even the performance of this speech, become a part of the historical and cultural legacy of the Civil Rights era. However, the next frame (219; see figure 1.4) more directly embodies portraiture through its interest in depicting the facial features of King, offering his face at a slight angle and profile. This focused frame directly recalls filmic recordings of King's speech, especially the ABC footage (*Eyes 2*). King's likeness is here being rendered on multiple levels, as film already mediates the actual event; Anderson's graphic novel then intercedes thirty years later to further mediate the image. The multiple layers of media recordings of the historical event requires an interpretative awareness and procedure similar to that asked of savvy readers of slave narratives. Anderson challenges the notion that a complete image or understanding of any person is given by the temporalities of media; his use of film as inspiration reveals how visual representations move through time, becoming not only a marker of personal identity, but also a prescient narrative tool for considering how text and image construct racial identity.

The portrait that Anderson renders of King in this scene is of particular interest because it resists the static iconography exhibited by the traditional photographic technology that concerned Frederick Douglass. Instead, Anderson's portrait moves, not only from the backside of King, but from a lower vantage point (218), as perhaps witnessed by a member of the audience, to a traditional profile portrait, finally stopping on a detailed illustration of King's eyes (219). Anderson here enacts the fluid motion of a portrait allowed in the freer visual space of the graphic

novel. Though still limited by the conventions of framing, Anderson's portrait nevertheless resists standing still; literally enacting the motion of King's legacy through levels of media and time. Through these framing practices Anderson supplements the techniques of portraiture, creating a fluid visual narrative perspective able to present multiple angles and visual perspectives of King.

By focusing on King's eyes, Anderson foregrounds the visual biography's pre-occupation with racial representation. The mobile aesthetic invoked by Anderson brings into sharp focus issues of seeing and being seen as a central concern to racially marginalized writers throughout history, not to mention writers of slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass. Through a close-up rendering of King's eyes, highlighting King's final words, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," Anderson draws an explicit connection between the verbal and the visual (219). Anderson literalizes King's rhetoric; citing the lyrics of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," while focusing on King's eyes to establish the notion of visuality and visual reading. I will discuss this technique of visual narrative more rigorously in the following chapter, but here it is important to understand how Anderson constructs a formal likeness of King. Anderson's portrait is one that encapsulates the political weight bearing down on a man, hours away from an assassin's bullet, while focusing on a single element of this image, namely King's eyes.

King's eyes here become a metonym, one that aspires to the same descriptive potential as a traditional portrait rendering. Anderson conflates King's civil rights leadership, King's thoughts on the future of the movement, and King's physical body into a single motif, the motif of vision. Anderson uses this motif to emphasize the relationship between King's political and social vision, arguing that to understand King's politics is to understand the man himself. In reading a graphic portrayal of King's speech, the portrait not only invites the reader to remember the freedom and

resilience King advocated in the words of his speech, but to also understand that these ideas are embodied in a physical person. Thus, Anderson utilizes the conventions of portraiture to render both King's politics, and his person, in a way that highlights the intersections of both. King's identity, or the memory of his identity, is defined by the cross-currents of both discourses, the contemporary politics of the sixties, as well as our understanding of who King was as a person.

Kyle Baker, in his acclaimed graphic novel *Nat Turner*, also uses portraiture, this time insisting on a more militant consideration of the subject, to render the image of the late insurrectionist. Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia on August 21, 1831. Citing biblical justification for his cause, and the evidence of atmospheric phenomenon he interpreted as divine support, Turner organized various slaves working in and around Samuel Turner's plantation. The rebel band quickly grew to seventy and began killing white slave owners near the Turner residence. The revolt was soon put down as a white militia, supported by artillery and detachments of troops from nearby naval ships, ultimately outgunned and outmanned Turner's group. Turner was eventually hanged, and his comrades either similarly executed or sold. Bands of armed whites, fearful of more slave uprisings, terrorized the region, killing any blacks seen outside of a plantation.[21] Many writers have attempted to represent this uprising, most notably William Styron in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron's novel ambitiously attempts to find creative inspiration from the original confession Turner gave to Thomas Gray after Turner's lengthy flight into the surrounding woods. However,

[21] For a more nuanced reading of Turner's rebellion within its historical context see Aptheker.

many black writers rejected what they interpret as Styron emasculating depiction of Turner as a sexually disturbed figure.[22]

Baker's contribution to the growing cultural responses to Nat Turner participates in the slave portraiture tradition, using a portrait of Turner to complicate popular images of the leader of the slave revolt. Thus, Baker's use of Turner's story indicates how African American writers have integrated historical narratives into their own creative work. In his study "Drawing on History in Recent African American Graphic Novels," Michael Chaney contextualizes Baker's novel in relation to media representations of African Americans. Chaney examines a number of black graphic novels, including ones by Anderson and Baker, and claims that a central characteristic of them is that they signify on mainstream accounts of black historical figures ("Drawing" 176). History provides African American graphic novelists with a definite narrative to position their own work against, Chaney argues. Specifically, Chaney locates a process of signifyin' on renderings of history within Anderson's *King* and Baker's collaboration with Aaron McGruder and Reginald Hudlin, the graphic novel *Birth of a Nation: A Comic Novel*. However, what needs to be examined is how Chaney's own work in illustrating the connections between slave portraiture and textual renderings of racial identity are inscribed in Baker's solo work, *Nat Turner*. It is true that Baker's *Nat Turner* signifies on mainstream history. But Baker's invocation of the publishing tradition of slave portraiture is an extremely relevant narrative technique not discussed by Chaney. Like the signifying Chaney identifies, allusions to portraiture here create a divergent narrative ontology, one that inscribes a political discourse aimed at revising impressions of the fallen insurrectionist and signifyin' on the historical record of slave revolts. Baker, as well as

[22] The strongest literary response to Syron's project can be found in John Clarke's *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.

Anderson, use these moments of portraiture to supplement story, signifying through both visual and verbal storytelling techniques.

To demonstrate Baker's use of this technique I would like to examine Baker's illustration of Turner's hanging (196-7; see figure 1.5). This image is particularly important because it revises historical conceptions of Turner, positioning his likeness within a tradition of martyrdom rather than militant defeat. Turner has finally been taken prisoner and offered his textual confession to Thomas Gray while in his Southampton jail cell. A series of silent frames (where no text is given)[23] reveal the captured leader being taken to a lynching tree and his final earthly moments. A young white girl points and laughs as the shackled Turner passes (192), calling into sharp relief the changes Turner's capture has brought to the social order of Southampton. Just a few weeks ago Turner contemplated the killing of another white child who has been forgotten by his accomplices (118; see figure 3.3).[24] Instead a much more visibly reserved and contemplative Turner endures the jeering of a white population that had feared for its life as Turner's marauders brutally claimed victim after victim. Once the noose has been placed on Turner's neck (194), the anxious faces of the assembled whites become wide with expectation (196) as Turner's body calmly accepts death (197). Baker depicts Turner's lynching with the same watery shapes used throughout the novel. The muddy coloring accomplishes an almost sepia quality for the overall image as Turner's body contrasts with the light sky behind. The hats and tops of the gathered audience are almost unintelligible against the ambiguous shapes of the lynching tree and the surrounding forest, but nevertheless form a boundary and reference point for the height of

[23] Chapter two will examine and analyze a possible reason for Baker's near-exclusive privileging of visual images over text.
[24] The implications this image has for issues of racial invisibility will be discussed at length in chapter three.

Turner's body. Turner is clearly elevated as the bottoms of his feet are aligned with the tops of the heads.

Rather than re-inscribe the white hegemonic social order by showing Turner's body as repulsive and thereby according him the role of historical villain, Baker invokes a sentimental image of Turner in an attempt to elicit an emotional response that accords Turner the status of hero or deity. For example, the theme of loss is implied through the juxtaposition of Turner's body with the image of a single leaf falling from a barren tree (196). Just as the falling leaf is an objective correlative for the death of nature, so Turner's hanging body is understood by readers to imply the death of the natural and vibrant life force. Baker does not simply depict the historical chain of events that have hitherto destined Turner's lynching, or the act of lynching itself. Rather, Baker illustrates Turner's death as an historical snapshot in order to complicate and supplement the historical impression of Turner. Though not a traditional portrait per say, Baker's depiction of Turner's body is somber and elegiac, responding to the immediate historical reaction to Turner's lynching that would have applauded the passing of another physical threat to white supremacy. While pressing the limit of sensationalism and potential insensitivity to the dignity of Turner's body, Baker must depict this moment in Turner's narrative to emphasize a sentimental response to Turner's life. The portrayal of Turner's lynching must be considered by Baker because it was part of the man's life and establishes much of the man's legacy that emerges after his death. Rather than mark the end of a life, Turner's lynching initiates another phase of his refutation of an imposed racial order.

A particularly poignant element of this refutation is the special attention Baker draws to the reaction Turner's lynching has on the white audience, thereby empowering Turner's final

postmortem act of resistance. Through endnotes, Baker informs the reader of the disturbed reaction of the gathered audience to the lynching, noting their primary concern with the lack of movement in Turner's body (204). Rather than writhing in pain or fear, Turner's body in its death throes assumes a calmness, and "he simply rose into the air, breathing his last, peacefully without twitching a muscle" (204). In a wide frame that focuses on the faces of several whites gathered around the lynching tree, Baker catalogs the immediate response to Turner's lynching. The onlookers' eyes are wide with both fear and awe at the sight they behold, which we see in the following frame showing Turner hanging from a tree. The first frame serves as what Genette calls a "preface" to the second frame. Genette writes that the preface "has as its chief function *to ensure that the text is read properly*" (original emphasis 197). The preface essentially introduces the reader to the way in which the text is to be read. Thus, the fear and awe easily discernible in the white onlookers' faces direct readers of the graphic novel to a proper interpretation of the next frame showing Turner's body. The reader is invited to consider Turner's lynching as a final act of resistance, rather than a capitulation or defeat. Instead, as Baker's endnote makes clear, Turner's body rises from the ground without protest. Rather than satisfy the lustful gaze of the white audience, Turner accepts his fate, as if his everlasting life is already assured. It is this quality of acceptance and confidence that best accords a reading of Turner as martyr, as a righteous hero living amongst a fallen people, and as a Christ figure. Baker's portrait of Turner thereby invokes the image of the martyr to resist a dominant rendering of Turner as villain.

Though what happened at Turner's lynching cannot be known with certainty because there is a scarcity of records concerning the event, it is important to understand how this depiction of Turner supports Baker's emphasis on Turner as a martyr. In fact, in his visual rendering of this

"saint's life," Baker seems to play a role similar to that of medieval hagiographers. In describing the role of medieval hagiographers, Mary-Ann Stouck reminds us that they "ignored opportunities for factual evidence in pursuit of their definition of the higher goal of virtue" (xvi). Stouck's claim is especially relevant to Baker's rendering of Nat Turner, albeit toward secular rather than religious ends. Baker is concerned with revising the image of Turner in the modern imagination, adding narrative details to his account of Turner's lynching that dramatize an already poignant situation. In the narrative moment of Turner's lynching Baker assigns a heroic quality to Turner and consequently champions Turner's and his followers' violent resistance to slavery. Baker here revises and refigures the historical legacy of Turner through an acceptance of the violence invoked by Turner's group.

Baker's revision of the history of Nat Turner's revolt outlines two perspectives artists may assume when revising historical narratives. Comparing the revisionism of Anderson's *King* to that of Baker's *Nat Turner* reveals the ethical weight of performing a revised historical narrative of two prominent African American figures. Anderson's novel undermines the certainty of King's reputation through a poignant examination of King's relationship to his Christian faith. Baker revises the narrative of Nat Turner, reformulating this story as a defense of violence against racial domination. Baker's novel is brutal in its disregard of human life, whereas Anderson ultimately makes King seem more human and real, a man deepened through his self-reflection. Anderson's revisionism rejects Baker's approval of violence, though it maintains a parallel interest in considering how readers may encounter the historical figure of King. Portraiture and an awareness of the importance of personal visual images allow these graphic novelists the form for interrogating these historical legacies.

Providing a more archival though nonetheless politicized dimension to this aesthetic are the portraits used in Laird, Laird and Bey's recently updated *Still I Rise: A Graphic History of African Americans*. These artists remediate portraiture as a means of remembering black heroes. Originally published in 1997, this work attempts to provide images of black history through its immediate present, the 1997 version culminating with the Million Man March. Given the changes brought by Barack Obama's ascension to the presidency, the producers of *Still I Rise* felt compelled to re-release the work, giving it an updated final section that concludes with Obama's election. Narrated through the voices of an older couple, this work is interested in portraying black history from the earliest manifestations of indentured servitude and slavery. *Still I Rise* is a product of Roland Laird's Posro Media, a multimedia company focused on presenting positive images of black people Laird's contribution to an article in the *New York Times* clarifies this vision, arguing that through the production of black-owned comics about black characters, stereotypical images of black identity will be dissolved ("At Posro" B5). Elsewhere, Laird has stated that Posro is intent on creating a comics equivalent of Ralph Ellison's classic *Invisible Man* (Mills G4). Charles Johnson, writing in the Foreword to the 2009 version, argues *Still I Rise* may be the completion of this vision, given its historical depth and epic span (xvi). Thus, Johnson prepares readers, in the traditional paratextual function described by Genette, to read *Still I Rise* as not simply a graphic novel but as a graphic history narrative, told through pictures and words.

Many of these pictures are essentially hand-drawn portraits of famous black leaders, establishing the political and aesthetic concerns of this novel. The frames in the novel are mostly simple images recalling the visual traditions of cartoons through crude drawings of human forms. However, the images of the white slave owners seen espousing the exploitative measures of

slavery are grotesque and exaggerated. These facial expressions counter centuries of likewise racially restrictive visual imagery of black individuals, and establish the political valence of *Still I Rise*. The first of these caricatures occurs as white colonial leaders in North America discuss the economic feasibility of hiring indentured servants (2; see figure 1.6). This page attempts to represent the House of Burgesses in Jamestown, Virginia using the graphic novel to revise a very specific historical moment. During what is understood as a legislative meeting meant to address the economic issues facing colonial landowners, a plethora of unattributed dialog bubbles fills a black void. This image symbolizes white power and black invisibility. The voices of white colonial leaders give shape to what was previously the untamed space of the black frame, providing a racial dialectic evocative of the system of slavery. The speakers establish the economic basis for instituting slavery; one speaker mentions that the cost of maintaining indentured servants is making the profitability of tobacco diminish. The others discuss the issues, several citing the gains made by using African slaves in the West Indies. Eventually this discussion is concluded by what is perceived as the leader of the colonial powers declaring "Very well, we shall try the Africans" (2). The physical image of this character is particularly startling because as he strokes his chin, considering the eventual exploitation and forced enslavement of millions of Africans, his entire face seems pulled back. The white wig, which seems to terminate in the middle of the top of the head, as well as the sleek look of the exposed skin, makes the white man here seem inhuman.

Elihu Bey, the illustrator of *Still I Rise,* is here enacting the same de-humanizing practices embodied in historical images of blacks, recalling the demeaning images of black Sambo, Mammy, and the Pinckney, among others. Though not a true portrait in the sense that it focuses on

the subject alone, this image does betray the politics being inserted into the narrative framework of *Still I Rise.* This image recalls the exploitative visual images that constrained blacks to the stereotypical figures listed above, while also establishing the artistic concerns of the work as a whole. Strict realism is a marker of humanity, a humanity that is not prioritized in Bey's depiction of the white colonial leader, an anonymous man who has seemingly brought the entire tradition of slave importation to the North American colonies. Humanizing visual depictions in *Still I Rise* become pointed political statements that counter the visual legacy of racializing portraits of African Americans. The white colonial leader becomes a caricature because within the politically-charged visual domain of *Still I Rise* he symbolizes the antithesis of positive notions of blackness. As the arbiter of North American slavery this particular individual loses his humanity precisely because he would deny the humanity of African people.

To demonstrate how a realistic rendering of bodies aesthetically denotes political ends I skip ahead a few hundred years, to the portraits of Madame C.J. Walker that reside in the panels of *Still I Rise.* This image is decidedly more realistic, more human than the previous depiction of the colonial master. The portrait of Walker is the only full-page portrait included in the entire novel, though Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Dubois are among the other luminaries given half-page portraits of their own. What sets Walker's portrait apart is the realist quality of the drawing, which resembles a photograph. Individual strands of hair are discernable, an appropriate detail given Walker's involvement with scalp treatments for African American women. Thus, a humanizing image of the first black female millionaires in history creates a heroic image, one that is vastly more appealing than the caricature of the white colonial leader.

By creating a dichotomy between the caricatured and the humanized, *Still I Rise* values the portrait image for its ability to set certain individuals above the mundane. The portrait of Walker presents a positive reading of Walker's body, one that reverses a tradition set in place by the racializing eye of the slave owner. For *Still I Rise* portraiture is used as a narrative tool, in the tradition of the two graphic novels described above, inserting the image of Walker into an ongoing historical narrative. Walker's portrait operates as a moment of historical recollection. The prominence of her image prioritizes her accomplishments as a central concern for *Still I Rise*. The great financial success of Walker, a history that is sometimes glossed over, is here being given center stage through both visual and textual discourses. Madame C.J. Walker is a positive image of black America, her financial prowess displaying the heights of personal achievement afforded a black woman able to transcend the limitations imposed by race and gender.

Portraiture constructs a canon of black heroes in *Still I Rise*, through the realistic illustrations of individual bodies. Bey also draws a portrait image of Booker T. Washington, one that is included in a textual narrative that emphasizes his status as a black hero. After describing the optimistic, though eventually failed, political alliances between African Americans and the populist movement of the late nineteenth-century, the male narrator's voiceover appears above a portrait of Booker T. Washington and describes how "in the midst of all the false starts and betrayals one man felt that he held the solution to America's racial problem" (126; see figure 1.7). Accompanying the portrait of Washington is a description and brief narrative of his major work contributing to the racial uplift of African Americans. The panels describe and illustrate Washington's privileging of industry and manual labor as a means of bringing about economic improvement in the black community, ostensibly leading to the quelling of racial difference.

Subsequent frames feature Washington applying the skills he learned at Hampton to found his Tuskegee Institute, while also selling his form of racial uplift to the white industrial leaders, a vision literally embodied by dollar signs that replace the eyes of the nation's industrial leaders (127; see figure 1.7). Thus, Washington's contribution to black history is ostensibly presented as a positive one, a project that trades social integration for economic and financial gain.

For a reader acquainted with the history and criticism of Washington's role in black history, this revisionist project that values heroic and positive traits troublingly fails to make distinctions between these black historical figures or acknowledge the critical debates surrounding their contributions. Included in the depiction of Washington's success, for example, is his famous "Atlanta Exposition Address," the illustration of which features his likewise (in)famous quotation that "the negro and the white man can be separate as the five fingers on the hand, yet come together like a fist in economic matters" (128). The narrators of *Still I Rise* do not comment on the problematic nature of this statement, a theory of racial uplift that has long been a source of discussion in studies of African American literature. Rather, Washington's speech is lauded for being the first time a black person had spoken to a large crowd of prominent Southern whites (129). Thus, *Still I Rise* invokes the visual language of portraiture to present positive images of famous black individuals, creating a heroic tradition that eschews any critical perspective on these figures.

The cover is also of importance in *Still I Rise*, because it presents a truncated canon of important black figures. The front cover features perhaps two of the most recognizable black figures in today's popular culture, Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama. The inclusion of President Obama on the cover implies that the creators of *Still I Rise* seek to make their graphic

history as up-to-date as possible and that black history is immediate and ongoing, not just entombed in the dusty books of times long ago. Obama's prominent placement establishes the context for the creation of this graphic history and authorizes him as the most recent black hero, but also one within a black history and tradition. Martin Luther King, Jr. is immediately to the reader's left, with Madame C.J. assuming a place that wraps around the spine, followed by Harriet Tubman and a portrait of Jeremy,[25] the leader of the 1739 Stono Rebellion. These figures form an angle on the cover page, one that moves downward from right to left, establishing an historical timeline, one that is forever fading into the distance of history, though forever re-vitalized with the emergence of leaders such as Obama. What is important to this lineage is the prominence of weaponry for two of the final figures. Jeremy's spear foreshadows the violent uprising depicted much later, as he attempts to lead his followers to the relative safety of Florida, his spear dripping with the blood of slain masters (36). Additionally, Harriet Tubman calmly holds a rifle in one hand, her other clasped behind her body. Her bodily strength is undeniable, as the rifle is held steady, matching the cool determination evoked by her eyes. Her involvement in the Underground Railroad also includes the prominent placement of her rifle, with the later image of her leading a string of escaped slaves through the dark likewise depicting a rifle held in one hand.

That these images are included, in what at first glance appears a benign tradition of leadership in the black community and American culture, clarifies the politics espoused by the historical narrative of *Still I Rise*. If *Still I Rise* uses portraiture to erect a canon of black leadership, this canon privileges violent resistance and dramatic upheavals as central to hero formation. Thus, the image of Obama, an image triumphantly given as the culminating image of

[25] There is some discrepancy over the name of the slave leader of the Stono Rebellion. The creators of *Still I Rise* simply refer to him as Jeremy (35).

the entire novel (217; see figure 1.8) enacts the sort of personal achievement and racial uplift advocated by the novel itself. Obama's placement in this canon of heroes reveals the implication of his election in what the cover implies is predominantly a history of violent resistance. The reader is guided to understand Obama's election as revolutionizing, a moment that uses portraiture to inscribe the image of the recently elected president into a historical narrative of heroic achievement. Obama assumes his place at the head of a long line of heroic figures, black leaders who rejected the limitations of race, a place where the entirety of black history in America has led to the election of the first black president in history. The confetti and repetition of the statement "Barack Obama wins 2008 election—becomes first African American president in U.S. history," over a floating portrait of Obama, marks his ascension into the long tradition of leaders and heroes encapsulated by *Still I Rise* (217). The use of this portrait image is pivotal considering the frequent use of this illustrative technique throughout the novel. Like Madame C.J. Walker, or Booker T. Washington, Obama is given mythic stature.

I have argued that black graphic artists work in a pictorial tradition originating in slave narratives. Just as Frederick Douglass was concerned with, and manipulated, his visual image to confront and resist the strictures of his abolitionist publishers and audience, so too do black graphic novelists utilize the role of portraiture to create rhetorical appeals. Michael Chaney's formulation of the importance of the visual image in understanding slave narratives is pertinent to a study of the black graphic novel. The role played by graphic art, especially photography, in determining and inscribing racial identity on black bodies outlined by Foreman, Casmier-Paz, and Blackwood, is also critical to understanding how portraiture expands the narrative of graphic novels. To understand how ex-slaves and abolitionists manipulated visual images of authors is to

understand the potential this visual narrative has for the graphic novel. The hybrid nature of the graphic novel makes it a fertile medium for exploring the potential uses of portraiture as a narrative device. Black graphic novels reveal an awareness of the impact of visual embodiment described by the photographic elements of early slave narratives. No longer does the portrait function as simply a paratext or "threshold" through which the text itself is read. Instead, portraiture becomes a valid and critical narrative element within the graphic novel itself. Black graphic novels and early slave narratives both share a concern with seeing and being seen, a concern partially assuaged by portraiture.

Chapter Two

Refiguring the Talking Book as a Visual Discourse through the Logic of Remediation

This chapter considers how black graphic novels not only remediate, but also revise and confront racially constructed notions of literacy inherent to Henry Louis Gates' "trope of the talking book." Gates' trope has defined discussions of literacy within studies of African American literature through his seminal analysis of slave encounters with the Bible. Central to his theory are conflicting notions of literacy and learning. Slaves attempt to gain the textual literacy denied by their slave status, while educated white figures demonstrate a mastery of the text through their ability to make it "speak." Black graphic novels maintain an intense interest in the racial privileging underwritten in this system, whereby racial differences define literacy differences. However, through visual communication black graphic novels circumvent this system, offering visual literacy as an anachronistic counter to the talking book. And yet, these same graphic novels insist on a metafictional awareness that places their discourse within a modern political narrative. Through an awareness of the racial politics specific to the trope of the talking book, black graphic novels position their work within and against one of the primary theories of African American literature.

From their inception, graphic novels have maintained an interest in visual forms of literacy. Will Eisner, whose work establishes the formal characteristics of graphic novels, has cited symbolism and stereotypes as essential narrative devices for the graphic novelist (*Graphic* 11-15). Though Eisner empties the term "stereotype" from its racial connotations, he maintains that graphic novels use stereotypical figures to communicate a condensed language of narration and characterization (14). Through this process, a fox-like appearance personifies a character as

a wily or conniving villain, whereas a character with large eyes and glasses is understood as owl-like or wise (14). Within this visual shorthand, Eisner calls attention to various associations made between specific objects (a daisy considered a "good flower," one with thorns a "bad flower"). Even the placement or handling of an object communicates a very specific language for serving as "modifying adjectives or adverbs…provid[ing] the storyteller with an economical narrative device" (15). McCloud alludes to René Magritte's famous painting "The Treachery of Images,"[26] equating the Belgian's painting with the successive layers of reading required for understanding graphic novels (*Understanding* 24-5). Describing the visual language of graphic novels, McCloud positions "icons" as the definitive visual tool for graphic novelists through their resonance as visual signifiers (26-30). The nuanced work of graphic novels, these critics argue, calls upon what Eisner terms the "residue of human primordial experience" to communicate effectively (*Graphic* 14).[27] Thus graphic novels demand an active relationship between artist and reader, unlocking the nuances of visual narrative.[28]

Understanding how artists and writers communicate from within a shared language becomes even more central when formulating an African American tradition of graphic storytelling. Perhaps the most integral theory relating to literacy and shared language or thinking within the African American tradition is Henry Louis Gates' seminal "trope of the talking book."

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[26] The Belgian painter produced an image of a pipe with the French inscription "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe"). Magritte's work has become important for many postmodern theorists, among these Michel Foucault who explores the paradox of the image in his 1973 book *This is Not a Pipe*.

[27] Linda Adler-Kassner gives a cogent analysis of how in the 1950s E.C. Comics served as the catalyst to formations of community for child readers. Likewise, Hatfield has elsewhere urged childhood studies and comics studies to acknowledge the common ground presented by comic book studies. In his article, "Comic Art, Children's Literature, and the New Comics Studies" Hatfield considers recent trends in critical publications against the common issues of both children's literature and comics studies critics.

[28] Hatfield's book historicizes the rise of what he terms "alternative comics," since 1968. Though more concerned with specific underground movements and reactions within comic book and graphic novel creation, Hatfield also maintains an interest in the collaborative relationship between comic book creator and reader.

Gates calls attention to how early African American writers confront literacy from within the slave system, finding that the Bible will not "speak" to them in the same way it ostensibly speaks to white slave owners. By gaining literacy and an understanding of English, slaves gain the language of the talking book, and are therefore able to comprehend what the talking book "says." Race becomes a significant element of the relationship between slave and book, as race establishes the parameters and defines the limitations of this interaction. The racial hierarchy demands that black slaves remain ignorant and unable to read, as this would undo the de-humanization justifying the system itself. As slaves become more literate, their humanity becomes undeniable and unravels racial difference through knowledge. Through writing their narratives early black writers enact their mastery of the language of the talking book and also demonstrate their standing as human beings.

Within the individual narratives of former slaves, Gates identifies the trope of the talking book as evidence of Signifyin', the literary process through which black writers incorporate and revise the work of their peers. The process of Signifyin', what Gates terms "the black trope of tropes" (51), constitutes the founding trait of the Black English vernacular tradition (xxii-iii). Signifyin' describes how black writers incorporate and revise the work of previous writers, contributing a new perspective within a growing literary tradition. For Gates, revision and incorporation are the definitive characteristics of African American literature. Each successive black writer acknowledges the work of previous writers and then expands or revises this work through shared tropes and motifs. In essence, this process renames and reconstitutes the work of previous writers, and as Gates makes clear "[t]o rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify" (xxiii). Gates demonstrates how James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Olaudah Equiano,

among others, participate in this "tropological revision" by featuring the talking book as a turning point in their own strides toward literacy (xxv). The common use of tropes cements a foundation for a literary tradition, one specific to the experiences and cultural production of African Americans (128-9). By eventually gaining literacy, either through formal education or reading primers outside of master's careful gaze, these black writers eventually gain mastery over the elusive language of the book, finally able to allow the book to speak to them. Each writer then slightly alters or revises this trope within their respective narratives. Through this form of "repetition with a difference," early black writers were able to cite intertextual connections with their peers, while also revising the specific rhetorical function of the talking book within their own narratives.[29]

Through this process of negotiation these writers make implicit statements concerning the moral and ethical parameters of the institution of slavery. These early black writers equate literacy not only with being able to understand the language of any book, but the Bible in particular.[30] For them, the Bible represents access to God and an understanding of how Christian virtue can become an ally in their struggle to survive the slave system. Allen Callahan calls attention to this paradox, writing that "African Americans confronted the Bible as a book both opened and closed. As the Word of God it spoke to them, but as a written text it greeted its illiterate black readers with silence" (12-3). Black slaves sought to become educated in the tenets

[29] In *Understanding Contemporary American Literary Theory* Michael Spikes contends that Gates' theory is heavily indebted to the work of Harold Bloom, citing Bloom's contention that "literature is produced through anxiety-driven revisionary strife between authors" (58).

[30] Gates' analysis focuses on slaves interactions with the Bible exclusively. As the most prominent and widely read text it necessarily becomes an important marker for gauging literacy. However, the theories of intertextuality formulated by Gates doesn't consider the trope of the talking book as a phenomenon exclusive to the Bible, but more general reading practices as well.

of Christianity, but found that their access to the primary text of this religious tradition was compromised because of legal restrictions on literacy based on their race. Slave owners sought to keep slaves from gaining too much literacy, perceiving this knowledge as a threat to the institution of slavery, a system ostensibly justified by the evangelical potential of converting so-called heathens. Though certain sects of evangelical preachers sought to spread literacy and so encourage reading of the Bible, given their insistence on direct access to God through the Bible itself, many slave owners maintained a legal hold on slaves' access to the word of God (Callahan 4).

Confronting the paradoxes and absurdity of the slave system, the trope of the talking book acknowledges the racial hierarchy inscribed onto the pursuit of individual literacy. It is not simply a neutral concept of reading that black writers seek, but is specifically a white, European conception of textual learning implicitly predicated upon the assumption of white racial superiority. As Gates notes, "Literacy, the very literacy of the printed book, stood as the ultimate parameter by which to measure the humanity of authors struggling to define an African self in Western letters" (131). By "making the white written text speak with a black voice," these black writers strike a blow at the racial hegemony precluding their full understanding of textual learning (131). Yet, through seizing the "voice" of the talking book, black writers are still being initiated into a racializing system. Their experience of the book is dependent upon an understanding of reading texts dictated by European notions of learning: learning is gained through reading, the act of writing itself denotes acquired knowledge and competency, the written supersedes the spoken. This last trait becomes increasingly pivotal for black writers

attempting to reconcile the potential of visual storytelling with an interrogation of how textual reading defines racial difference within the talking book.

An examination of visuality within and against textuality reveals how visual literacy within graphic novels inverts this relationship through a privileging of the visual over the textual. John Berger inscribes this conception within the process of childhood cognition, arguing that "seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (7). Visual interpretation comprehends not only the text itself, but the larger world, existing as a more critical paradigm for understanding. The visual encapsulates the textual in the sense that the words of a textual utterance are already defined through the visual of the letter and the word. Each letter denotes a specific element of textual communication, a combination of several letters forming the visual referent of a more specific text (i.e. a word). Thus, visual considerations of textuality position themselves within a visual/textual dialectic that defines itself through the privileging of visuality over textuality. The visual takes precedence because it already integrates the language of the textual. Berger even locates within visual traditions a process akin to Gates' conception of Signifyin'. Berger notes that visual images carry their own tradition of reproduction, re-creation, and revision (20). Within this tradition he notes that as a photograph of a painting, for instance, becomes inserted into the popular market through mass production "its meaning is diversified," through the changing contexts of place and time (20). In essence, Berger's observation admits a possible visual Signifyin' process aided through expanding visual economies and means of production.

The black graphic novels included in this study further this tradition by remediating and responding to the trope of the talking book, positioning this rhetorical device against the

dismissal of graphic storytelling as a viable artistic medium. Kyle Baker's biopic *Nat Turner* is particularly pre-occupied with conceptions of visual and textual literacy. Not only does Baker's novel almost exclusively use images to tell its story, but it also locates the text of Turner's appeal within an ongoing rejection of political system. Though separated from the immediate effects of slavery by over one hundred fifty years, these graphic novels "signify on and reconstitute the political past to intervene in the enduring legacies of slavery, minstrelsy, apartheid, and commodification that haunt the present" (Chaney "History" 176). Specifically, through remediating the traditionally textual representation of the talking book into the hybrid form of the graphic novel, these artists enact the ethics of revision implicit in its rhetorical function as the uniting trope for African American literature. Not only do these graphic novels maintain an interest in illustrating racially-defined forms of literacy, but they also revise this trope to consider visual reading as an alternative form of reading opposed to the limitations of white forms of reading. This chapter applies the interest in texts, specifically the repetition of talking books, within black graphic novels as a means of demonstrating the continued revision of Gates' concept of "black formal repetition" (xxii-iii), a theory crucial to establishing the potential of graphic novels to revise the theories of African American literature.

The notion of remediation is central to graphic novels that maintain thematic and political issues addressed by the trope of the talking book. Remediation illustrates the positioning of one media within another. Through this logic one media remains privileged as it provides another context for understanding the original media. The original media becomes represented within the new form, and can function as an element of the new media. As seen in the example cited in chapter one, a webcast inserted into a webpage allows the viewer to experience the images of the

camera while also interacting with elements of the webpage (Bolter and Grusin 6). Remediation can be used to describe how graphic novels insert either visual depictions of the trope or internalize the experience of an individual negotiating the trope. The trope becomes a part of the narrative in the same sense that early African American writers used the trope within their own narratives as a rhetorical device. It is transferred into the visual media of the graphic novel. Graphic novels, therefore, remediate the trope and tales of literacy-as-freedom in a visual form in order to imply an alternative to that literacy tradition, the alternative of visuality.

Through visuality remediation offers a new perspective on the historical tradition of the talking book, allowing the reader to re-interpret the older form of the idea against the "preoccupations of contemporary media" (Bolter and Grusin 21). Thus, the process of remediating the traditionally textual representation of the talking book to the visual language of graphic novels highlights concerns specific to the black graphic form. These concerns range from such themes as re-presenting the very racial dichotomy of master and slave (a difference maintained through access to reading), applying the trope's interest in competing forms of literacy (oral vs. written) to understanding current debates around visual and textual literacy, as well as demonstrating how textual narratives define and encompass individual narratives and experiences within the African American tradition. At times this remediation adheres closely to the logic of the trope, becoming a visual interpretation of the talking book (*Still I Rise*). Other times this process becomes recognizable through metafictional allusions within the visual narrative (*Icon*). Remediation also becomes a driving concern of the formal development of the novel, using the logic of the talking book to establish an indeterminate narrative logic wherein a graphic representation of the trope reveals the meta-fictional position of the novel itself (*Nat*

Turner). In this last example the trope itself becomes remediated into the story, inserted within the narrative, while also calling attention to how the narrative loops back on itself. Visually remediating the trope of the talking book allows these graphic novels to create their own visual Signifyin' tradition while at times deconstructing this Signifyin' process through their focus on the increased importance of visuality over literacy.

Still I Rise provides an example of remediation closely related to the textuality of the talking book through intermedial allusions to *David Walker's Appeal*. The novel places the *Appeal* within the historical context of the Missouri Compromise and Denmark Vesey's violent revolt. The narrators describe how the Missouri Compromise, which admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, outlawed slavery north of the 36' 30 latitude (72). The resulting tension of this already tenuous political agreement, according to the narrators, leads Vesey to articulate his violent rebellion against slavery. Seven years and two frames later *David Walker's Appeal* becomes a black-authored text implanted within Laird's graphic novel (75; see figure 2.1). The frames immediately following the depiction of the *Appeal* are understood as establishing the first National Negro Convention (76; see figure 2.2). The words of Walker's text are immediately voiced and embodied as a speaker reads a portion of the *Appeal* to a room of black men, becoming a "speakerly text" in the sense that it becomes an oral form of expression within the African American community (Gates xxv-i). Walker's words are made to speak directly to an assemblage of black men, thereby existing not only on the written page, but spoken and given life through the act of speaking. Thus, this frame visually remediates the talking book as it represents a talking book in action.

Gates' trope relies on the interaction of a single individual with a book that resists reading, whereas this example presents the trope within a public oration. The book talks as the unnamed orator speaks the words to the assemblage and allows them to experience Walker's text through hearing the oratory of the speaker. This remediation of the talking book is, however, essentially a visual representation of the trope. Lacking the strong connection to a personal narrative, the trope here nevertheless makes a political statement through multiple levels of literacy. By recalling the logic of the talking book, this frame embeds a concern with the text and how the individual interacts with the text. Crucial to understanding the potential of the remediation of the trope is unpacking the historical context in which *Still I Rise* inserts the talking book.

Through the remediation of the talking book, and as a speaking text, the *Appeal* provides the inspiration for the creation of a political and social body. Following the logic of graphic novel reading, or sequential art,[31] *Still I Rise* equates the rhetoric of David Walker with an ongoing conversation about the "back to Africa" movement, as well as to violent attacks against the system of racism (76). The male figures meant to represent the discussion amongst conventioneers who declare their interest in migration to Canada, Africa, and learning "to build things that can enable us to live fruitful lives" (76). These otherwise benign interests are then underscored by the haunting statement by a face split vertically in the bottom frame: "What we need to do is learn how to shoot white folk" (76). The next frame segment depicts Turner's revolution emerging from two times and perspectives: Turner's identity as a "good slave" and his insistence that "Judgment Day is coming" (77; see figure 2.2). Through visual shorthand, Laird,

[31] See McCloud *Understanding Comics* 8-10.

Laird, and Bey quickly gloss over Turner's revolution within two full pages (77-8), while weaving this historic slave rebellion into the graphic history of African Americans contained by the novel. The writers of *Still I Rise* then draw a direct connection between the oral reading of Walker's *Appeal* and the violent revolt led by Nat Turner. *Still I Rise* collapses the underlying historical complexity of David Walker's text, the first National Negro Convention, and Nat Turner's revolt, by correlating the three events.

While certainly related events, the juxtaposition of these events within the narrative of the novel strains historical causality to the point of breaking. Following the limited perspective mentioned in chapter one, the reader is not given a nuanced critical perspective on this historical narrative. Instead the narrative assumes that each event occurs successively without any social or political developments specific to each individual occurrence. For example, immediately following the discussion of the proper response to Walker's text, the narration shifts to a discussion of Nat Turner. Turner is introduced in relation to the previous events, stating that "one year after the first National Negro Convention, a slave in South Hampton, Virginia, made his own resolution about slavery" (77). Within the logic of this simple narration, the speaking text of Walker becomes the inspiration not only for a detailed discussion of the future of the African American community, but also for Turner's violent revolt. The logic of the talking book, as a document that speaks to the reader as well as to the fictional audience within the story, functions within the historical narrative of *Still I Rise* to draw connections between written texts and physical actions. Though admittedly not striving to become a nuanced historical document, the narration of *Still I Rise* juxtaposes the violence ostensibly advocated by David Walker with the violence enacted by Turner.

Visual representations of the talking book also occur in Milestone Media's *Icon: A Hero's Welcome* which depicts the growth of a near-immortal alien being into a stalwart protector of the people of Dakota, the urban setting for Milestone Comics. Icon is an alien whose spaceship breaks down while touring the galaxy. His hasty escape forces Icon to crash land his escape pod on earth (9-10). He then subsequently assumes the image of the first life form with which he comes into contact, a female slave living in the South (12-3; see figure 2.3). Icon's assumed racial identity as an African American sets his story apart from the traditional and hackneyed superheroes of Superman, Spiderman, and Batman. Icon takes the name of Augustus Freeman, and lives through slavery to the contemporary moment of the novel (the mid-nineties when the book was published). Having supernatural powers allows Icon to outlive all those around him, becoming a living reminder of slavery, and an enduring symbol of resilience against slavery. Through this extended superhero narrative *Icon* dismantles and deconstructs racial and superhero stereotypes and myths through close parallels between his narrative and that of Superman, perhaps the quintessential image of a white heroic figure. In the Preface to chapter one, noted film director and critic Reginald Hudlin muses on *Icon* as "a brilliant self-reflexive critique of the grand-daddy of comic book icons [superman]…as accessible a 'black thing' as jazz, hip hop and blood transfusions" (7). Hudlin describes the creative process wherein the character of Icon attempts to declare a specifically black cultural identity while embodying the classic comic book superhero. Yet, Icon begins the novel far from the heroic symbol he will become. Instead, he sits at the desk of a powerful legal firm, his adopted mother literally looming over his consciousness while the shackles of his own lived slavery serve as physical reminders of a past he is unable to escape (13).

Icon meets Raquel, a young black girl living in Dakota, who becomes involved in a plan to steal from Icon's wealthy mansion, and through this relationship realizes the potential of his superhuman power. Raquel, an aspiring writer following in the footsteps of Toni Morrison, constantly pressures Icon to use the powers that have lain dormant toward positive social ends. It is Raquel who creates the nicknames for both of them, going so far as to design typical superhero costumes (24). Raquel then becomes an integral part of the action and adventure of the series, fighting crime and correcting wrongs with the aid of Icon's powers. Through this experience Raquel finds her place in the world, and ultimately generates the creative impetus for her own literary production. Thus, narratives and literary production become intimately tied to the narrative progression of the novel. Within the visual narrative defined by the graphic novel writing and the identity of a writer function as driving concerns of Icon and Raquel's adventure. Through Raquel, Icon understands his place in the earthly world of Dakota, and inspires the narrative she attempts to write as the story progresses.

A complex system of authors, texts, and narrative construction operate within *Icon*'s superhero narrative and work together to authorize a visual and textual narrative of the superhero protagonist and title character of the comic book series. Jennifer Ryan has discussed the role of the female character of Raquel (Rocket being her superhero alter ego), becomes a guiding figure for understanding how Icon's heroic narrative is constructed and perceived by his audience. She argues that Raquel "assume[s] control of Icon's narrative, guiding him toward his superhero destiny and revealing his participation in the major events of African American history" (919-20). However, within Raquel's function as author of Icon's narrative lays her interaction with novels and texts. Raquel turns to writing and personal reflection as a means of processing and

understanding events in her daily life. Through this interaction she better understands her own work as a writer. From this emerging literary consciousness Raquel assumes the role of narrative agent, providing a fictional outlet for preserving Icon's superhero exploits. Though certainly an important figure for examining how Icon realizes his superhero status, Raquel also recognizes the importance of language and learning. Through language and learning Raquel records a textual narrative of Icon's adventures, placing her own literary pursuits within the same tradition as Marrant, Gronniosaw, and Equiano.

Crucial to Icon's power within the graphic novel, and his function as living symbol of African American history, are books and his collection of knowledge. Raquel discovers this collected knowledge first hand while breaking into Icon's mansion along with three male teenagers: Lenny, Deke, and Noble. Though resistant to the idea at the start, Raquel becomes ensnared within the boy's scheme. Noble, the titular head of the small gang, realizes that the local police will be occupied with the Big Bang, an experimental gas used on an outbreak of gang violence populating the wasteland area of Paris Island.[32] The heist is eventually discovered by Icon, while the three boys are busy carrying a large television (17). Raquel has drifted away from the group; a signal of both her conflicted conscience and desire to move beyond the restrictive life afforded by crime, and finds herself in Icon's study. The immense collection of books makes Raquel jealous—no surprise given her previously stated desire to become a writer like Toni Morrison (14). For Raquel these books provide evidence of an extraordinary intellect and archive of culture. She says as much when reflecting that "whoever lived here had more than

[32] Icon later finds out that the mayor of Dakota ordered the use of an experimental tear gas that caused genetic mutations within the bodies of the few survivors of the attack. These survivors became The Blood Syndicate, an assortment of super-powered characters Icon and Raquel eventually defeat. The Blood Syndicate also forms a separate novel series within the Milestone universe; see McDuffie, Velez, Von Eeden, and Pepoy.

money, they had *knowledge*. They had *history*" (original emphasis 16; see figure 2.4). Though not directly confronting the racially-imposed limitation to learning, the collection of books marks Icon's singularity as a master of books. He has progressed from slavery to the modern era, marking his ability to conquer the talking book through his collection, able to command the language of books and gain power through that language.

Though Raquel serves as the driving force behind the development of Augustus Freeman into Icon, the superhero protector of Dakota, it is the relationship both Icon and Raquel have with books that defines their relative ability to make sense of their own narratives. When the two meet to discuss the future role of Icon, Raquel reads a direct quotation of W.E.B. DuBois classic theory of the talented tenth. In this moment Raquel allows the book to speak to Icon, inviting him to pursue a course of action that will make him a member of the talented tenth (27). Interestingly, "By Their Own Bootstraps" functions as the subtitle to the collector's edition of the first issue of *Icon*. This subtitle subverts the racial/social orders embodied by the two main protagonists, and gestures toward Icon's insistence on maintaining the Horatio Alger myth of personal advancement.[33] Raquel nevertheless seeks to deflate this argument, insisting that through an elevated position Icon will be able to guide the African American community from a position of power and strength, both traits derived from his extensive knowledge and reading ability. Raquel, in addition to serving as an authorizing presence for Icon's narrative, privileges reading and the ability to master the talking book as a validating and inspirational tool for the future hero. Though Icon claims to be "more of a Booker T. Washington man myself," the ability

[33]Alger best exemplifies his theory that through hard work and determination anyone can achieve wealth and greatness within the American social system in his most popular novel *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York with Boot Blacks*.

for these characters to quote two of the seminal African American social theories invokes the logic of the talking book. In this moment two speakerly texts create a dialogue. Rather than being barred from understanding the language of the book, both characters define a sense of identity within the potential described by the books each of them has read. The future for Raquel and Icon is predicated on translating the language of the talking book into viable physical actions, thereby empowering the act of reading as a tool for identity formation. Whereas Gates insists that the trope functions to highlight the growth of a writer, his ability to write his own narrative dismantling the racist attempts to prohibit his literacy (137-8), the talking book here serves as a guiding narrative for future action. Though Icon and Raquel debate precisely the appropriate methods for improving life in Dakota—that this debate can even occur—highlights their ability to move beyond the limitations enforced by the talking book.

Likewise, Raquel's engagement with literature, specifically Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, embodies a form of intertextual reference for the creation of *Icon*. Ryan has called attention to how Raquel thus provides substance and form for Icon's narrative (936). Raquel's desire to model her own writing on Toni Morrison becomes a central concern of the novel upon her first encounter with Icon as a supernatural figure. Icon re-figures her own pre-conceived notions of the freedom within writing. She writes of having read Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and understanding that in the book "flying didn't *mean* flying. It meant something else. Flying was like freedom. I thought I understood the book, but I didn't. Not really" until, that is, she observes Icon's ability to literally fly over the heads of her fleeing would-be criminal peers (19-20). After this, Raquel recollects, while writing in her journal, that all she could think about was "the sudden possibility of flight" witnessed in Icon's actions (23). This preoccupation inspires

her to return to Icon's mansion and broach the idea of Icon and The Rocket (Raquel) as superhero characters (24). Thus, Raquel's literary interests are excited by Icon's potential to serve as a symbol of justice to the people of Dakota. After fighting crime with Icon, Raquel gains a new perspective that inspires her creativity and serves as the driving force behind her own literary pursuits. At the conclusion of chapter eight, the final chapter in the first collection of the *Icon* series, Raquel has finally learned of Icon's other-worldly origin and his near-immortal status. This knowledge inspires Raquel to take up the literary pursuit that has nagged at her consciousness throughout the previous eight chapters, finally deciding to put Icon's story to paper, and "write about history, about achievement. About heroes. And the sudden possibility of flight" (191; see figure 2.5). This final allusion to Morrison places Raquel's own pursuits within the same literary realm as the famous novelist. Raquel has seemingly gained the perspective that will allow her to assume the status of narrator in earnest. The story she seeks to write is Icon's, a story ostensibly held within the bounds of the graphic novel held by the reader, though as much a narrative of Raquel as it is of Icon. Raquel presents the allusion to Morrison to highlight the very act of fiction-making, demonstrating her unique position within the trope of the talking book. Rather than a subject or victim of the limitations enforced by the talking book, Raquel is able to insert her own voice into the book itself, positioning the literal *Icon* alongside the canonical figure of Morrison.

In this way, black graphic novels remediate the trope of the talking book, revising and updating it where necessary, as a strategy for privileging the very act of fiction-making through visual and textual media. Crucial to the example in *Icon* is the use of metafiction to self-reflexively promote the graphic novel as a media capable of depicting the intense personal

struggle of finding an identity compatible with the imposed racial hierarchy of American society. Icon's status as an alien being highlights his assumed racial identity, deconstructing the reasons for his supposed difference even as it calls attention to how these differences impact his narrative.[34] Madelyn Jablon specifies the traits of metafiction specific to black aesthetic production, arguing that black metafictionists "recognize artistic creation as an ongoing process. They see artistic process as a metaphor for identity and self-invention, and they focus on the experiences of the artist rather than just the artwork and its effects on an audience" (29-30). The notion of the artistic process as ongoing describes Raquel's perpetual desire to become a writer, a pursuit developed over the first eight chapters of *Icon*. Through this process Raquel's future literary work, and implicitly the published graphic novel, becomes intimately connected to the talking book as a driving metaphor of narrative creation. By assuming an authorial position as narrator of the novel, a function Ryan argues is central to revising notions of female authorship (921), Raquel speaks the language of the book, becoming its originator and life blood. Remediating the trope of the talking book allows the graphic novel to examine black metafiction as a viable artistic mode, while also positioning graphic storytelling against the literary hierarchy likewise unraveled by the trope of the talking book.

This literary hierarchy becomes completely dismantled within Baker's novel. Baker's novel catalogs the experience of Turner's father as a slave imported from Africa then initiated into the hard labor of working a cotton plantation. The novel begins with a picture of a house servant (73-4). With the absence of the master and his family assuring her of a moment's rest,

[34] Offering the only major analysis of *Icon* yet published, Ryan reads into Icon's genesis story an ethic of "passing," of assuming a specific racial identity simply to survive the daily toils of life that complicates claims to his "authenticity" as a symbol of African American experience.

the unnamed woman begins thumbing through what is assumed to be a child's grammar book, the photographic representation of a lion figuring as a common image used to teach elementary alphabet rules (e.g. "L is for Lion"). The visual image plays an important role in this scene as it re-enforces Berger's privileging of visuality over textuality. The woman is eventually found, and subjected to a brutal beating, her ankles tied above her head, the whip administered by the hand of Turner's father (74). The scene recalls the story of Frederick Douglas, who likewise gained literacy from the discarded grammar books of the young Thomas Auld (35).[35] A slave attempting to gain literacy poses a threat to the unchallenged authority and control of the white master. Just as Douglass acknowledges that the only good slave is an ignorant slave (Douglass 33), the female house servant must be brutally punished for her transgression. Yet, the female slave's encounter with the language of the grammar book, and the potential that she might understand its speech, emphasizes the construction of a racially-defined engagement with literacy and reading.

On a formal level, Baker's novel maintains an interest in literature and literacy by remaining true to the original Nat Turner narrative, inserting Baker's creative license only when the text does not offer a description of the event being represented. Baker draws explicit connections between the original text of Nat Turner's confessions and his own graphic representation of this text. The graphic novel is nearly wordless, except for passages drawn either directly from Turner's original *Confessions* or contemporary works that illuminate the inner-workings of the slave system.[36] Baker equates his graphic representation of Nat Turner to the

[35] Deborah McDowell examines the connection between authorial control of his narrative and Douglass' drive to gain literacy and knowledge in her essay "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition."

[36] Baker includes an excerpt written by Captain Theodore Canot, twenty-year captain of a ship transporting African slaves as well an endnote citing *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (36, 204).

historical events of the uprising through textual fidelity to Turner's original narrative. In so doing, Baker makes Turner's narrative "speak" to him, and by extension his reader, animating the static words on a page into a bleak though impressively visual narrative. A break between the original and Baker's own creative narrative occurs, for example when Turner's father escapes the clutches of his plantation home, disappearing into the night. The young Turner, having just enjoyed a rare opportunity to play with his father, nevertheless screams into the night, "Run Daddy, Run," a remark not noted in Turner's original narrative, but one crucial for implying future character development of the youngster into the adult revolutionary (82-3). This digression falls just before a sequence depicting Turner's budding literacy, juxtaposing the physical resistance enacted by the father with the act of intellectual resistance of reading for the son. From his father's flight, itself triggered by having to punish a fellow slave for attempting to read, Baker depicts Turner's turn to the Bible as a means of gaining the weapon for his future uprising.

Turner first reads the Bible, making the talking book speak to him, inverting the exclusionary effects of the words as experienced by the writers cited by Gates. Instead of documenting his struggle to make the language of the book intelligible, the adolescent Turner seemingly understands the book intuitively. Baker's sequence focuses on the liberating politics held within biblical stories. Turner's imagination is given form through the biblical stories, graphically rendered by Baker; Turner's eyes are glued to the open pages in each frame while the stories materialize around him (86-7; see figure 2.6). The first frame features the shackled wrists of slaves suffering under the cracking whip of Egyptian masters. The images draw a clear connection to the suffering detailed in biblical stories, and the very real suffering endured by

Turner and his fellow slaves. Reading these stories, Turner is educated in resistance, which Baker equates with the flight of fugitive slaves. The inclusion of passages from Turner's original narrative alongside Baker's graphic rendering of these thoughts highlights the close relationship between the two works. Baker's visual *shows* the Bible speaking to Turner, attempting a mimetic function that privileges visuality and enactment. Turner's original narrative text operates as the narrative voice, while Baker applies visuality to describe the actions represented by the frames. In a sense the words of Turner's confession define the visual representations created by Baker, reinforcing the power of the text itself. Yet within Baker's frames, visual images are privileged as the young Turner translates the textual narrative of the bible into visual images through his imagination. While the Bible offers Turner the stories of resistance necessary for his violent revolt of slavery, Turner's understanding of these stories through visual images becomes the primary means of understanding.

Baker further considers the role of reading and visual images through a frame narrative that remediates an instance of the talking book. Opposite the title page beginning the entire novel, an image of two eyes peering into a bright white book serves as a paradigm for the novel itself (see figure 2.7). Given Baker's interest in promoting reading, especially of forgotten black historical figures (6-7), this image establishes the major thematic concern of the novel (liberation through reading). But it also signals Baker's remediation of the trope of the talking book. Baker invites his reader to become the person featured in the image, a young black child ostensibly reading in the night because that is the only free time allotted, using reading to overthrow the debilitating and de-humanizing effects of slavery. The black child gains control of the bright white book, symbolizing an attempt to control the foundational text of white racial difference. As

discussed above, literacy was used by slave owners to establish and maintain the so-called superiority of whiteness. Within this visual Baker presents an image of subversion, a moment when one individual dismantles the system of slavery through the simple act of reading.

Though Baker writes in a decidedly less violent or overtly racist society, he invokes Turner's story to position reading as a viable political tool not only in Turner's time, but in the current historical moment as well. In the Preface Baker offers a somewhat banal, though nevertheless relevant, description of the political potential within reading. He writes:

> He [Nat Turner] became a leader of men because he developed his mind by reading, which happened to be illegal…We are fortunate today to live in a free country where access to books is unlimited. If a man in Nat Turner's circumstances was able to change history, imagine what you can do with the freedom you have today (7).

Baker's interest in promoting reading becomes a crusade tied to political awareness of marginalized historical figures. Reading recovers Turner from an historical record seeking to erase his very existence, or (perhaps even worse) consign his entire life to a single paragraph (6).[37]

Turner's narrative becomes a story of liberation and inspiration for later generations. In the graphic novel, after his hanging, Turner's body is brutally destroyed by white figures seemingly dissatisfied with the blood and violence provided by the lynching tree. Turner's body becomes fractured, each limb and body part separated from the other (198; see figure 2.8). Even through this ordeal, Turner's spirit remains, in the form of a book. A white man, making his way

[37] The next chapter will examine more extensively how Baker and the other graphic novelists respond to theories of invisibility within African American culture, especially demonstrated through their interest in historical narratives and characters.

to bed and the promise of a tomorrow with one less black threat present, places a book on a side table (199). The man's slave, knowing the man will not return for the book, disappears into the darkness of a solitary room with what a line of printed text reveals to be a copy of "The Confessions of Nat Turner." This sequence provides the image found on the title page, creating a cyclic structure that perpetuates Turner's story as a relevant and viable political narrative. Turner's narrative speaks to the white slave owner, who understands the language, but is unwilling to listen to the message. Instead, the black slave seizes the book, knowing it not only speaks to her in a figurative sense, but in a political sense as well, providing the political awareness and inspiration Baker sought for his own novel. Thus, Baker uses visuality to invert the trope of the talking book. Rather than excluding the black individual from reading, Baker's reconfiguration of the trope initiates the black reader and alienates the white reader.

The inclusion of a photograph of an old printing press within the graphic representation of Turner's death furthers the confluence of visuality and the talking book within Baker's novel. The photographic image that separates the brutal mutilation of Turner's body and the white slave owner discarding Turner's confession represents an old printing press.[38] It is implied that the reproduction of Turner's words inverts the ripping apart of his physical body. Through text Turner's struggle lives on through a continued existence that transcends the limitations of the physical body. The talking book, therefore, provides a means of escaping slavery even as the graphic novel inverts the racial hierarchy established by the original trope. The white slave owner is unable to make sense of Turner's confession and casts it aside. The black reader re-

[38] At the time of this writing an image search on Google using the search terms "old printing press" reveals a near exact copy of the image linked to a blog written by Dottie Smith in an article describing the first newspaper printed in Shasta county California.

assembles these pieces and maintains Turner's legacy through reading what the looping of Baker's visual images establishes as Turner's confession. In a sense Baker implants his own novel within this logic as his reliance on the text of Turner's confession permits Baker's novel to serve as a visual supplement to the confession. Baker's text can provide the same sense of liberation and resistance as Turner's narrative because the violent resistance condoned through this story remains essentially intact. The logic of remediation describes how Baker incorporates not only the trope of the talking book, but Turner's narrative of resistance as well, and provides another level for experiencing Turner's violent resistance to slavery.

Through the use of black metafiction and visual juxtaposition to comment on the trope of the talking book *Icon, Nat Turner,* and *Still I Rise* position the graphic novel as a media deeply indebted to the logic of remediation. When invoked by African American artists and writers this revision and intertextual reference becomes initiated into the logic of Signifyin'. As the "black trope of tropes," Signifyin' and the talking book establish not only the parameters of a burgeoning literary tradition for early black writers, but also become integral to understanding how black graphic novels consider their own work in relation to notions of reading and literacy. Rather than commenting explicitly on the talking book, graphic novels are able to remediate the talking book, integrating what was once a solely textual device into the graphic form. Because the graphic novel is both a visual and textual media, it is the critical location for understanding how media are able to integrate one another. The hybrid nature of the graphic novel already incorporates two media into each other, already enacting the remediation described by Bolter and Grusin. What sets these novels apart is their remediation of a literary trope, one that signals the

intertextuality of a series of texts, but also highlighting how texts impact readers and the world around them.

By remediating the talking book and making it a central concern of narration and literary indeterminacy *Nat Turner* most directly utilizes the talking book to "speak" to the potential of the graphic novel as an artifact of an ongoing political movement. However, each of these novels features talking books as crucial narrative devices. Through this shared interest in the talking book these graphic novels construct the same foundations for a literary tradition as their antebellum predecessors. In essence, they operate the trope of the talking book twice, once to call attention to notions of literacy and reading, the other to cite the unifying elements critical to the tradition of African American literature.

Chapter 3

Self-determined (In)visibility within the Historical Black Graphic Novel

Perhaps the quintessential trope of African American literature, "invisibility" describes the marginalized status imposed on black identity and black culture since slavery. Graphic novels provide a unique site for understanding invisibility, both by utilizing visual images and as a physically recognized critical, cultural, and historical archive. The preoccupation of black graphic novelists with historical narratives may be attributed to their creators' desire to critique the dominant master narrative that pushes African American contributions to the margin. This chapter examines how black graphic novels and their reliance on the trope of invisibility, of seeing and being seen, fashions a counter-historical narrative. These graphic novels literally create new images of black characters, while also pointing to the inherent limitations and problems within this new "visibility." Therefore, visuality provides a paradigm for negotiating competing conceptions of invisibility. As a visual/textual form, the graphic novel problematizes invisibility through the subjective ownership of a self-determined (in)visibility. Each protagonist of these graphic novels attempts to become more visible subjects. However, an increased visibility, as either public persona or historical anecdote, inevitably leads to the loss of a deepened sense of self. Through historical narratives, these graphic novels thus effectively interrogate the subject/object relationship. The problem of visibility becomes linked to historical representations of blackness. Thus, these graphic novels represent two kinds of invisibility, one unmasked and one remasked, the latter establishing the problems of visibility.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* most clearly established the trope of invisibility within the twentieth-century African American novel tradition. As the decisive novel to feature a sustained interest in the intersections of race, identity, and invisibility, *Invisible Man* has become the cornerstone work for twentieth-century writers and critics seeking to understand how blackness can become a form of negation, a form of nothingness. In the prologue to the novel, Ellison examines Louis Armstrong and his rendition of the song "What did I do to be so Black and Blue?" against the racial politics of a white-dominated society seeking to obliterate blackness and therein negate the humanity of African Americans (12). Invisible Man muses on a series of visions and dreams that have dominated his thoughts before initiating his narrative. Invisible Man admits to being particularly drawn to Armstrong because "he's made poetry out of being invisible" (8). Armstrong's music creates artistic expression from the psychic malaise of blackness (his invisibility). In this context, invisibility represents an attempt of the white-dominated society to strip blackness of its humanity. Whiteness depends on the negation of blackness, ignoring any claims to the humanity of a black subjectivity. However, Invisible Man understands Armstrong's subversion of this dialectic as he fashions art out of this process, invoking music as an expressive mode for questioning the assumptions of this system (i.e. "what did [he] do to be so black and blue").

Elsewhere, in his essays, Ellison assumes a more critical perspective, examining the role of words in formulating and inscribing race and racial difference within twentieth-century literature. Ellison gives a cogent statement concerning the racial underpinnings inherent to language: "Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word….For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind,

imprison and destroy" ("Twentieth Century" 24). Language is for Ellison a system that enacts the same segregation constructed by the society one year prior to *Brown vs. Board of Education.*[39] Ellison calls attention to the lack of humanizing black characters crafted by white writers within the twentieth-century tradition of fiction, citing these writers' proclivity to "seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human" (25). Ellison's notion of invisibility can be read within this analysis; such a process of negation and stereotyping constructs African Americans as a presence rather than as present. More than forty years later, Toni Morrison builds from this idea to argue for the unseen presence of blackness as formative to the whole canon of literature itself.

In her essay "Black Matter(s)" Morrison contemplates the relationship of "Africanism," or the cultural presence of African peoples within Eurocentric perspectives. Morrison contends that American literary culture "has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power" and that these white-supremacist elements of culture "are removed from and without relationship to the presence of black people in the United States" (310). Morrison rightly contends that the formation of a definitive American literary tradition relies on the negation or invisibility of African American literary voices. Just as Ellison reveals the limitations of twentieth-century depictions of black literary characters, Morrison is concerned with the invisible contributions of African Americans to the American literary tradition. She contends that "to maintain [this] invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (311). What complicates Morrison's reading of

[39] The *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision was originally handed down May 17, 1954. Ellison originally published his essay "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" in 1946, and then again in 1953. It is from the latter that I draw my conclusions of Ellison's concepts.

invisibility is her insistence that the notion of "whiteness" is dialectically defined through the negation of blackness.[40] Morrison insists that a literary study of representations of "blackness," ultimately reveals the foundation of literary constructions of "whiteness" (311). Thus, the invisibility of blackness signifies an unease of whiteness, and the ultimate inter-dependency of these racialized literary traditions. Morrison then historicizes this dialectic within the founding narratives of America's inception. From the beginning, Morrison argues, the American continent represented the potential of evading the present "into a kind of historylessness," a project immediately problematized through the presence of native peoples and the founding of African enslavement (313). Ultimately, Morrison's notion of invisibility unlocks the complex racial systems implicit within the trope of invisibility.

Responding to this trope, Ellison advocates a new formulation of black characters founded on Twain's depiction of Jim, "drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and his bad" (31). Rather than negative stereotypes that inscribe a specific set of expectations for the black individual, Ellison calls literature to create conflicted and developed black characters. Ellison's criticism inaugurated an aspiration in some novelists to present fully developed black characters, an aspiration, however, that becomes hardened into a dictum to create only positive characters and depictions of black life. Michelle Wallace later questions this insistence on formulating positive black characters and images at the expense of balanced and nuanced depictions of black identity. Wallace reveals the dangers of naïvely positive images of blackness. She considers how popular culture depicts black characters, arguing that "mainstream

[40] Morrison offers an extended study of the intersections of white and black literary traditions, with a particular interest in the creation of whiteness in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, of which "Black Matter(s) is an element. For an extended study of critical notions of whiteness from the perspective of critical race theory see Delgado and Stefancic.

culture habitually assumes that the first job of Afro-American mass culture…should be to 'uplift the race", or to salvage the denigrated image of blacks in the white American imagination" (1). Instead, Wallace argues that the priority of the African American writer and artist should be to faithful and whole representations of black culture. Through these images and characters, Wallace argues, the artist effects real change, removing the specter of invisibility from the black individual, allowing him to walk fully in the light of an acknowledged humanity. Both writers are concerned with deploying new forms of blackness and black characters to combat invisibility, and in so doing dismantle monolithic racism.

However, invisibility can assume a more sociological dimension, and be used to trace the interactions of the African diasporic people with societies and cultures around the world. Donald Martin Carter reads invisibility in relation to the process of diasporic expansion. The subordination and dislocation of African people becomes a crucial cultural paradigm for observing interactions between cultures. For Carter, invisibility is written within the socio/geographic realities of countries. African heritage becomes a marker of ostracism, a litmus test used to negate the identity or humanity of a group of people. Blackness, a signal of African descent, renders the individual or group invisible, removing them from the organic order or hierarchy of a given country or culture. Invisibility in this sense follows the self-description Ellison's Invisible Man: "I am invisible…simply because people refuse to see me" (*Invisible Man* 3). Carter then focuses on the effects of this social condition, the changes rendered to the individual psyche. From this analysis Carter rightly contends that the ideological supports of invisibility create the underlying norms of inferiority in the Western world (146). While Ellison uses fiction to document the effects of invisibility on the individual within a white society, Carter

examines it to understand the function of race and identity within the context of shifting global populations. Carter evades any clear statements about the cultural impact invisibility renders, but carefully posits invisibility as crucial to understanding identity and social hierarchies within the African diaspora.

Filling this gap in Carter's social and anthropological study, several critics have applied invisibility to examinations of literature and culture. In her monograph *Invisibility in African American and Asian American Literature*, Klara Szmańko argues that the trope of invisibility assumes a critical function within both African and Asian American literatures as both attempt to make sense of a social and cultural order seeking their erasure.[41] Szmańko emphasizes Ellison's contribution to establishing the theoretical parameters of invisibility as a literary trope, though acknowledges the existence of the conception prior to *Invisible Man*. Ultimately Szmańko agrees with Ellison's argument that ultimately black writers must define blackness on their own terms, from their own experiences (Ellison "Twentieth-Century" 44). Writing within this vein, Giselle Anatol applies invisibility to a reading of Anglophone Caribbean literature. Anatol develops the trope further, considering hypervisibility, the heightened sense of being seen due to racial or ethnic difference, alongside invisibility. She argues that Elizabeth Nunez' character Sara, from *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, experiences the paradigm of invisibility/hypervisibility as a Trinidadian immigrant attending a Catholic college in Oshkosh, Wisconsin (77). The white students at first ignore Sara, rendering her invisible to the social circles important to the college experience. Later, these same students acknowledge her presence only to relegate her to the role

[41] Szmańko argues that invisibility is a concept apparent in both literatures, a result of years of both de fact and de jure segregation and forced labor through out American history. In addition to a reading of Ellison, she offers studies of Sam Greenlee , Maxine Hong Kingston, and Chang-rae Lee.

of "type," and conflating her specific racial difference into the slur "nigger" (77). Invisibility and an incomplete historical awareness render Nunez's Sara a foreigner to her African American boyfriend, who feels she is unable to comprehend the motivation behind the Civil Rights movement (Anatol 77).

The historical narrative, and historicism broadly defined, thus provides a space for writers and critics to deconstruct invisibility and posit a new narrative as the basis for a broader conception of identity. Without an understanding of history, and its function as a tool for the dominant culture, invisibility persists as a racializing force, forever separating and antagonizing racial groups. Hayden White calls attention to how tropes define and determine history in this way. In *The Content of the Form*, White contends that history utilizes some of the characteristics of narrative while attempting to encapsulate the "real." He considers the "appeal of historical" as resultant from "the extent to which it makes the real desirable, makes the real into an object of desire, and does so by its imposition…of the formal coherency that stories possess" (21). Within this logic White argues that history, as a written discourse, follows the logic of narrative, calling into the question the objectivity of history and its representation of past reality. Invisibility enters into this paradigm because it defines the liminal space of African Americans and other minority voices within the narrative implicit to history. History serves an important function as the documentation of a social, political, or cultural group, but also records the absence of specific groups and the racial definitions making this process possible. Ellison likewise understands history as tropological and posits the formation of black and white identity as crucial to the American ideal: "this struggle between Americans as to what the African American is to be is part of that democratic process through which the nation works to achieve itself.…But we are

concerned here with fiction, not history" ("Twentieth-Century" 26). History, I would argue, is precisely the space necessary for combating the limitations imposed by invisibility onto black identity.

A concern with history becomes particularly relevant when examining the intense interest the graphic novel has maintained in history and re-formulating historical narratives. Michael Chaney interrogates the role of history in many African American graphic novels. Chaney opens his *MELUS* essay with a quotation from Hayden White, acknowledging the role White's theory plays in Chaney's reading of graphic novels.[42] Chaney contends that these graphic novels "explicitly thematize what Hayden White locates as the burden of history within the particular registers of an African American context and milieu…these texts question institutions of recollection" (175-6). For Chaney, and by extension White, the archival potential of history is critiqued in graphic novels concerned with the construction of black stereotypes, film (*Narcissa*), historical biography (*King*), and satirical re-imaginings of historical events (*Birth of a Nation*). History serves a pointed racial function, creating the very images of African Americans condemned by Ellison, or rendering African Americans non-existent. Graphic novels are able to revise this construction, according to Chaney, through their return to history. Chaney has proven graphic novels capable of considering the invisibility specific to historical narratives of race and the African American imagination.

Visual representations of historical narratives provide a paradigm for considerations of invisibility within the particular registers of African American literature and culture. The image

[42] Chaney's citation draws from White's essay "The Burden of History," originally published in *History and Theory*. In addition to a consideration of Anderson's *King*, Chaney's article focuses on Kyle Baker and Aaron McGruder's *Birth of a Nation* and Lance Took's *Narcissa*.

has long covertly or overtly disseminated racism and stereotypes of black identity. Paintings of whites' domination of blacks re-inscribed racial hierarchies and symbolized their economic power, a power built upon the mastery and symbolic invisibility of black labor (Jacobs 68). Black authors, as noted earlier, resisted this system through the manipulation and mastery of their own images, thereby striking out against the invisibility of blackness. However, motion pictures opened up a new frontier for racism, as *Birth of a Nation* revealed America's infatuation with stereotypes of the black other, and heralded a new era in the perpetuation of black stereotypes. Audrey McCluskey historicizes the creation of stereotyped black images: "from the beginning, images of people of African descent have played a primary role in the cinematic imagination of the West" (1). For McCluskey the western interest in depicting black characters becomes synonymous with the creation of racist understandings of blackness (2). Visual images work to enforce this understanding of black identity as commodified culture, accessible for most elements of society. The 1970s allowed for more opportunities for filmic representations of black characters, but also lead to the now infamous blaxploitation films depicting overly sexualized, violent, or otherwise excessive conceptions of black identity. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*,[43] widely considered to be one of the harbingers of blaxploitation, also opened up the place for film "posters with more audacious heroes, more self-defined images" (McCluskey xi).

Black graphic novels respond to this tradition by claiming control of the formulation of visual images of blackness. Much like their slave narrative predecessors, black graphic novels manipulate visual media to foreground the formulation of new conceptions of black identity. The graphic novels included in this study embody an intense interest in history and historical figures,

[43] Critics have debated whether *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* initiates the genre of blaxploitation, or if *Shaft* more properly displays the racist identity politics particular to blaxploitation. Both films were released in 1971.

utilizing invisibility as an implicit theme while establishing a new historical narrative. These historical narratives respond to the marginalizing effects of history, invoking White's notion of history as a creative space for the formulation of black identity and characters that counter the imposed forms of stereotypes. Yet, within this new formulation many black characters construct a self-determined invisibility that problematizes the entire understanding of invisibility as a limitation imposed upon black identity. Instead, multiple layers of invisibility, both imposed and constructed ironically contradict assertions of a visible black subjectivity. The graphic novel allows a platform that immediately changes invisibility into the medium of visuality. However, a focus on historical narratives implicitly requires a level of invisibility for the historical black figure. Each of the four graphic novels under consideration maintains explicit interest in history as a domain linked to racial identity and a reversal of invisibility. *Nat Turner* and *Still I Rise* emerge from the revisionist history of *King,* pressing their aesthetic creation to pedagogical purpose that continues the deconstruction of history beyond the act of reading the novel itself. *Icon* also considers history through Icon's near immortal status and de-facto function as archive of marginalized black contributions to American history. These graphic novels form a continuum of representations of invisibility through historical narratives. Through these historical narratives black graphic novel makes the invisible black figure visible, seeking to "picture" the black character, but are in fact already compromised through their status as representations.

Icon can serve as an important starting point for understanding how black graphic novels consider history. Icon ultimately reveals physical proof of his extraterrestrial origin once he and Raquel have formed a trusting relationship. Icon attempted to relate his origins once before, but Raquel doubted the extraordinary tale as a series of lies (152). When Icon begins his auto-

biography again, he offers his spaceship as physical evidence corroborating his story (183). Raquel learns that Icon comes from an idyllic world where race does not exist and he served as a mediator between parties when minor disputes arose (186). Once landing on Earth from a malfunctioning spaceship, Icon assumes the physical appearance of the Southern black slave who finds him, thus inserting his existence into African American history. Icon's superhuman abilities allow him to exist outside of the typical lifespan of a human being, living through slavery and Reconstruction and bringing that perspective into the present. The narrative arc outlined by Icon ultimately becomes the material for Raquel's writing, and provides a place for Icon's lived experiences to find textual existence (189-91; see figure 3.1).

Icon's near-immortal status counters the marginalization of African American contributions to history. Icon survived slavery, even aiding the Underground Railroad, gained a law degree from Fisk, expatriated to Europe prior to serving in World War II (189-90). As Raquel remarks "his life spans the breadth of the African-American experience" (190). The image of a bridge accompanies this last remark, and serves as a telling metaphor of Icon's function as embodiment of the invisible history of African Americans. Icon's ability to avoid death means that he literally bridges the divide between slavery and the racist ideology that exists in the current moment. Though Ryan reminds us that Icon's ability to function as representative of African Americans is already contested by his extraterrestrial origins (919), he has undergone the range of experiences afforded African Americans since slavery. As such, Icon's condensed historical narrative critiques the marginalization of African American history. To read Icon's brief biography, a process mediated through visual images and produced by Raquel, is to read the story of American patriotism. Yet Icon's narrative follows African

American history, pushed aside and forgotten. Though the novel itself does not sustain a driving interest in considering African American historical narratives, it establishes history as a barometer for considering the formation of African American identity.

However, Icon's assumed racial identity ultimately unravels his potential inversion of African American invisibility. Invisibility becomes doubled-troped within *Icon* as two negative representations of black identity result in a positive conception of blackness. Icon at first dismantles the invisibility of the black slave in American society through his emergence as a traditional superhero. However, this development renders Icon himself invisible as he must assume the limited identity of protector. Though Icon experiences freedom of movement in his new position, he can not reveal the truth of his origin and identity, therefore rendering a second level of invisibility. The important difference within this new, self-imposed, invisibility is precisely the self-constructed quality of this identity. Icon wrests control of black invisibility from the white-controlled invisibility; when Raquel initiates Icon into the tradition of the superhero, she reveals to Icon the potential power of owning the means of production for black identity (24). Though Raquel seemingly offers the superhero role as a place for Icon to finally "stand for" something, in so doing Icon becomes what his name implies: an image, figure, or representation ultimately devoid of subjectivity and therefore a fully-developed visibility. Thus, *Icon* reveals the historic invisibility of African American history, only to foreclose the possibility of a truly visible blackness.

A more sustained consideration of history establishing African American invisibility can be found when examining the cross currents of these fields within the graphic historical biography. *King* is perhaps the quintessential graphic novel for understanding how the graphic

novel incorporates both invisibility and historical narratives to deepen limited characterizations of blackness. Though Martin Luther King Jr. was perhaps the most visible African American figure of the civil rights era, or any era for that matter, the equation of his narrative with a concept of invisibility may seem counter-intuitive. However, Stanley Crouch charts the expansion and legacy of King in American culture, finding that "King now resides in many aspects of our culture," and "his image can be seen on posters, in paintings, sculpture, and in the voodoo dolls of vulgar representation that are part of the doom of all great men in a commercial culture of souvenirs" (9). Inasmuch as King has been remembered, he has also been forgotten. The lasting commodification of King's image parallels the decreasing length of sound bites from famous speeches meant to somehow encapsulate a man who was the titular leader of civil rights, but also struggled with the enormous weight of that pressure and responsibility. Anderson's *King* seeks to deepen the understanding of King as both a leader committed to social change, and as a man dealing with his own mortality and limitations. Anderson answers Ellison's call for a depiction of black characters such as Jim, with all their contradictions and fullness, crafting a narrative of King interested in recovering these human traits of the civil rights leader.

However, Anderson admittedly has constructed a narrative primarily based on fact and actual events, while also using creative license to imagine King's day-today life and thoughts. The jacket cover of the collected edition of *King* provides a paratextual insight into Anderson's mix of fact and fiction. The blurb that accompanies *King* summarizes the novel as "not merely a political biography filled with names and dates, but a fully rounded portrait of a fallible human engaged in a superhuman effort" (n.p.). This description places *King* within and against the popular reading of the civil rights leader, and offers a perspective on reading the graphic novel

within the literary construction of blackness sought by Ellison. By making a comment on the novel, the dust jacket operates one of the paratextual functions outlined by Genette.[44] For Genette, this element has the potential to provide a sort of preface to a fictional work, insisting on a paradigm through which the following pages are to be read (113). The *King* blurb innocuously accomplishes this task, implicitly positioning *King* within the cultural concerns of invisibility. The biographical narrative contained within *King* should not be read as a strictly political biography concerned with major speeches and events; instead this narrative should be read as part of an other-determined invisibility.

King, as the most publicly visible black man of his time, resists easy definitions of racial invisibility, yet the graphic representation of this narrative foregrounds King's own invisible subjectivity within his overarching visibility. As a black man King is invisible to an American society that, in Ellisonian terms, refuses to acknowledge him (*Invisible* 3). However, the Civil Rights movement provides King with an unparalleled level of visibility. King constructs a public persona opposed to the limitations of race and class, striking out against segregation and racism. Yet the personal side of King's identity can not be fully known. Anderson's *King* directly addresses this dichotomy by collapsing limited perspectives of King's public legacy. Instead, the graphic novel defiantly remains committed to recording King in both the public and private realms. Through visual representation, Anderson's graphic novel is able to record King's speech on the Montgomery bus boycott (48-51) then shift to an intimate moment when King cannot sleep (52). As King becomes more and more lodged within popular cultural archives, these personal and poignant sides of King's identity become increasingly invisible.

[44] Genette does not include an entry on dust jacket descriptions specifically, but accomplishes much of the same analysis when he considers the "please-insert" page meant to accompany copies of a book destined for critics.

King's status as a narrative written against the limitations of invisibility becomes questioned by Anderson's own acknowledgement of creative license when depicting the biographical information contained within the novel. The interest Anderson's novel maintains in representing the "fallible human" described by the blurb necessitates a certain amount of imagination. No person, even one as well-documented as Martin Luther King, maintains a complete record of every daily activity and thought that occurs. Therefore, Anderson admits to using the facts of King's life as the inspiration for a fictional visual biography. He relates the thorough research completed to prepare for his visual project, reading all manner of written material on King. Anderson then combined the historical knowledge and biographical insights into King's life with his own understanding of the potential of the graphic novel. He explicitly states that "No matter how much you know, you still have to *create*…I wanted to create *my* version of this story" (orig. emphasis qtd. in Crouch 10). The creative space assumed by Anderson allows the fuller dimensions of King's life to emerge, establishing a perspective on the man hitherto lacking from the popular culture legacies described by Crouch. *King's* depiction of life behind the limelight and flash of cameras casts King as a mortal, a man dealing with existential angst brought on by the challenging work of social change, even as these depictions may not be based entirely on fact.

Anderson wades into the murky waters of fiction as the civil rights leader reflects on the tension between his individual life and the life demanded by his position as the most visible civil rights leader (199 see Figure 3.2). Growing tension between non-violence and the explicit show of force advocated by the emerging black power movement have pushed King to the point of breaking. The death of Malcolm X leads these youth to question King's insistence on non-

violence as a mechanism for effecting the social change necessary for promoting racial equality. Additionally, King has moved his operations to Chicago, seeking to confront the entrenched de jure segregation of the north. The challenge of conducting the same tactics of non-violence within the context of northern segregation, and the resulting frustrations, force King to doubt the convictions guiding his progress through the South. King reflects that "you're expected to be perfect and you accept that role secretly knowing the truth" (199). The truth that King knows is that he can not possibly satisfy the image and expectations imposed by the public. Instead he knows that the visible self presented to the public does represent his personal self. Nevertheless King attempts to attain this perfection, all the while knowing his endeavors are ultimately futile. This perfection is unattainable, but it is the image King must present to the public. Anderson presents King's thoughts to construct, literally, an image of King that confronts his own awareness of the conflation of public and private spheres. Anderson features King's mental reflection on an issue undoubtedly central to King's experience in Chicago and interaction with black power, but the thoughts themselves are fictional and have no explicit relation to the published narratives of King. Instead, Anderson's use of King's thoughts allows *King* to consider the actual Martin Luther King as both legacy of civil rights and fallible human being.

The specific image Anderson uses to convey King's thoughts implicitly makes a statement about the historic invisibility of African Americans. The text boxes used to convey the individual thoughts of King are strewn over an outline of what is presumably King's hand. The hands symbolize King's religious devotion, but could also mark King's resignation and frustration with the pressures of his position. More importantly though, are the faces King's hands appear to either shielding to attempting to touch. No particular face stands out, but as the

faces terminate into obscurity to the left of the frame, one face resembles a stylized image of an Egyptian pharaoh donning the characteristic cylindrical crown. Anderson's inclusion of this image among faces that ostensibly represent the faces of King's devoted followers historicizes King's malaise within historic attempts to reverse the invisibility of African Americans. King's concern with the intersection of his public and private selves becomes enmeshed within a continuum of African history. The double exposure of a cemetery underneath the grouping of faces brings into relief King's mortality, further complicating any claims to King as an iconic and timeless figure. Though the panels delineating chapter two from three insist that "truth or myth—none of that matters. All that matters is the legacy," the multiple levels of visuality invoked by this frame call attention to King as both a cultural legacy and deeply conflicted human being (153). Thus, Anderson's King maintains an interest in the break between the ostensible visibility provided by a public persona, with the invisibility of the resultant marginalized private self.

Still I Rise and *Nat Turner* likewise apply the trope of invisibility to an historical narrative, emphasizing the pedagogical potential of the graphic novel. Both novels parallel *King's re*-figuring of the cultural and personal legacy of Martin Luther King, focusing on Nat Turner and the entire history of African-Americans respectively. All three novels insist on revising history in accordance with White's notion that history itself becomes defined by the perspective applied to its content (ix). *Still I Rise* and *Nat Turner* are unique in that they not only revise the historical record of African Americans but also have a definite pedagogical function.

Nat Turner violently presents a humanizing, though ultimately flawed, depiction of African American identity through the reflections of Nat Turner. Turner's evaluation of the

morality of killing his master's infant complicates a characterization of Turner as simply a blood-thirsty murderer (118-20 see figure 3.3). The first action of Turner's revolt is the killing of the Travis family, Turner's immediate slave owners and therefore the most immediate embodiment of the slave system itself. Turner has previously failed to kill his master, his hatchet glancing Mr. Travis' head (115). Gruesome illustrations by Baker emphasize the intensity of this killing as blood streaks across each frame, multiplying as successive murders are completed. Once the group has completed its mission, one of Turner's comrades remembers that a sleeping infant has been left in the house (118). We then enter Turner's consciousness as he contemplates the fate of this child. Within these focused frames (119-20) Turner recalls the dehumanization of enslaved Africans being torn mother from child, brother from brother. The illustrations provide a troubling justification for the killing of a child (an act ultimately carried out by Turner's accomplices Henry and Will). While the killing of the child is certainly deplorable, Turner's thoughts on the subject complicate reading his character as simply a violent brute. Turner does not want to kill the child simply because he is white, but sees within this child the dehumanization of young black children within the slave system.

The visuality implicit to the graphic novel allows Baker to consider the violence of slavery alongside Turner's revolt against this system. Through the visual juxtaposition of the images in figure 3.3 Baker calls into question the ethical bounds of Turner's reaction to slavery, and in so doing fashions an Ellisonian conflicted black character. Turner is cast as a man seeking to establish a black humanity against the system of slavery that would negate this humanity. Thus, Turner's violence is justified in Baker's novel as a subversion of the explicit dehumanization within the institution of slavery. Yet, Turner's strike against this system and by

extension Baker's depiction of Turner's resistance becomes problematic, as Turner seeks to justify to killing the white infant. Turner's thoughts emphasize that the dehumanization and brutal dismantling of the black slave family outweighs the killing of a single white infant. In Turner's mind the systematic separation, physical brutality, and psychic abuse of slavery become avenged through killing the child. Turner's logic presses ethical and moral bounds to be sure. Turner does not rise above the inhumanity and immorality of slavery, in the sense one would expect of King. Yet, Baker embraces this complexity and marshals it toward an ultimately humanizing, though conflicted, image of the slave revolt leader. Baker's visual characterization of Turner is Ellisonian, in the sense that it embraces the complexity and inherent dichotomies of a black character. Turner is presented with all his flaws, and becomes more human, and more visible through this presentation.

Still I Rise assumes a less violent though self-conscious pre-occupation with providing the oft-neglected African American figures and contributors to American history as a means of re-formulating dominant historical narratives. The foreword, written by Charles Johnson, emphasizes the book's project of "making visible" black history: "the book chronicles the often 'invisible' history of black America in Elihu Bey's energetic and uncompromising drawings" (viii). The figures, anecdotes, and narratives provided by *Still I Rise* explicitly present a compilation of forgotten or marginalized history. *Still I Rise* succeeds precisely because of the material that has been collected in the novel and inserted into an historical narrative. Particularly, the historical research provided by Laird, Laird, and Bey revises slavery, considering its physical depravity while also trumpeting the development of skilled labor and ability resulting from enslavement. The narrative perspective assumed by this consideration of slavery revises the

dominant narrative of slavery as simply a time of degrading physical and mental capacities for the enslaved African. Instead, *Still I Rise* interrupts this narrative by championing the triumph of black individuals over and despite the system of slavery.

The African American subversion of the limitations of slavery is perhaps most effectively encapsulated by the juxtaposition of overseeing with a cataloging of skilled labor development within the institution of slavery (22; see Figure 3.4). Laird, Laird, and Bey historicize the emergence of overseers, those intermediaries between slave owner and slave overseers meted out the slave's punishment, but were white control over the growing black populations imported daily from Africa. In Laird's novel, the unnamed leader of the white colonials reflects on this situation as he discusses the matter with his colleagues: "We are living in precarious times, gentlemen. The success of our colonies depends on the output of our black slaves….I guarantee you that keeping those blacks in line will pose a great challenge to us" (18). The white colonial leaders then embark on a plan that provides another layer of control within the slave system: the overseer becomes a figure who enforces the inhumane work schedule dictated by the colonial economic system (20). One slave owner is depicted recruiting displaced day laborers, urging them that their only job requirement is "keeping those bloody niggers in line" (20). The laborers previously seen debating their economic future are now assured of a critical place in the plantation hierarchy, if only to be one step above the slave. After detailing the brutalities demanded by the position of overseer, the narrative shifts to considering how African Americans gained valuable skills from slavery. The unnamed narrators remind the reader that some slaves were allowed to gain tradable skills such as serving as blacksmiths, shipbuilders, cooks, and seamstresses (22).

The juxtaposition of these two perspectives re-cast the traditional narrative of slavery, allowing the graphic novel to provide a narrative of economic development within the overarching characterization of slavery as a dehumanizing experience. In this way *Still I Rise* attempts to reconcile Ellison and Wallace's goals for depictions of black characters, while avoiding the overly negative or optimistic views of black history rejected by both critics. McCloud describes the visual mechanism required for a graphic novel to perform this understanding, arguing that frame sequences, indeed sequential art as a whole, provide a unique space for exploring the potential of juxtaposition and visual imagery generally (9). The graphic novel provides the specific apparatus for experiencing juxtaposition, for the sequences of frames require reader interpretation (McCloud 8-9). *Still I Rise* invokes the logic of visual juxtaposition to recover the historic responses enslaved Africans offered to the institution of slavery. The physical mastery of white overseers, and slaves' economic dependency, are juxtaposed to slaves' determination, resiliency, and abilities as skilled labor. Black achievement actually seems to trump white oppression, rendering the achievement of skilled labor as one lasting effect of slavery.

Elsewhere, visual juxtaposition is used within *Still I Rise* to make visible the achievements of several African American thinkers following the violence of the Stono rebellion. After describing the Stono rebellion, the narrative quickly shifts to documenting other African American accomplishments (35-9 see figure 3.5). The inspiration for the rebellion is cast as resistance to the increasingly harsh realities of slavery. Jeremy, the leader of the rebellion, cites the "way of the warrior," an ancestral legacy given to enslaved Africans as a means of bettering their situation (35). The physical resistance and outright war Jeremy organizes

functions as resistance that directly confronts the system of slavery: Jeremy heroically kills his white master (36). Following the representation of the failed Stono rebellion, Laird, Laird, and Bey describe the fall of St. Augustine at the hands of white colonial masters seeking to his escape from slavery (37-8). *Still I Rise*, then, reads both the Stono rebellion and the elimination of St. Augustine as an outpost of freedom for escaped slaves. However, the ultimate failure of the Stono rebellion opens up a place for *Still I Rise* to respond with other forms of resistance against slavery. The narrators relate that "despite slavery's ominous presence throughout the colonies, many free Africans achieved great things," juxtaposing the physical resistance of Jeremy with the intellectual resistance offered by a range of African American achievers (39). Following the logic of sequential art established by McCloud, the succession of these historical events can be read together as a self-contained narrative: the physical aggression of slave owners and overseers leads to the physical resistance of slaves and their attempt to gain freedom. Slave owners and colonial leaders counter by eliminating this freedom. Resistance to slavery persists through other non-violent actions. Thus, the accomplishments of Emmanuel Bernoon, Lucy Terry and Benjamin Banneker become synonymous with the Stono rebellion.

The visual images comprising *Still I Rise* capture African American history and seek to evaluate the dominant historical accounts of African Americans and make this history more visible. The subtitle, "A Graphic History of African Americans," already fashions the graphic images as a narrative particular to the history specific to the experiences of African Americans. The book's ability to provide this history defines its function as a pedagogical tool. Rather than serving as entertainment, *Still I Rise* makes a serious statement about revising the traditional histories of African Americans. Images of slave rebellions and mechanical innovations alter the

historical accounts of slavery, teaching this history as much as reveling in the ability to tell these stories. Thus, *Still I Rise* provides the same self-determined response to invisibility as *King, Icon*, or *Nat Turner*. *Still I Rise* follows the paradoxical construction of invisibility within a new visible black identity.

The implied potential for *Still I Rise* to function pedagogically foregrounds the graphic novel's self-determined visibility, while also emphasizing the limitations of this self-determination. Certainly revising historical accounts through visual media empowers *Still I Rise* to function as a pedagogical tool, teaching the history it seeks to recover. E. Ethelbert Miller, noted African American poet, provides a blurb on the back cover that demonstrates precisely this pedagogical function. He writes that "*Still I Rise* is a quick way to satisfy the hunger we have about who we are. I gave my young son Nyere a copy of *Still I Rise*. He came back with a head filled with history" (n.p.). Miller's statement succinctly establishes the limitations of the novel, its favoring of brevity and inclusion over depth, while also casting the novel as a potential pedagogical tool. The novel compresses history and provides an approachable medium through which the invisible history of African Americans can be revealed, or in this case satiated. Miller also problematizes the genre itself, emphasizing the youth of his son, thereby relegating the graphic novel to its already entrenched status as juvenile reading material. Admittedly, *Still I Rise* lacks the nuanced approach to history or historical figures embodied by *King* or *Nat Turner*, but it is precisely the attempt to construct a visual counter-narrative to the prevailing notions of African American experience that characterizes *Still I Rise* as a serious historical archive worth consideration, especially by readers with a "hunger…about who we are" (Miller n.p.). *Still I Rise* does attempt to complicate and give nuance to its history, but pushes this complexity outside of

the immediate physical space of the novel. The novel includes a bibliography inspiring further research (219-20) that ostensibly develops complexity within the history that has been visually represented. However, this paratextual element, to recall Genette, highlights the limitations of this particular graphic novel to provide an intricate understanding of African American history. Nevertheless, scanning through the bibliography reveals that Laird, Laird, and Bey have attempted to provide as wide ranging a perspective on African American history as possible. The cartographic work conducted by Molefi Asante and Mark Mattson[45] sits alongside the more traditional historical archive preserved by Portia James or Tom Cowan and Jack Maguire.[46] The bibliography not only spans a range of historical perspectives, but offers a continual source of learning inspired by the immediate experience of the graphic novel.

Understanding history, writing history and ultimately revising history has an enormous impact for understanding the construction of African American (in)visibility described by each of these graphic novels. From the condensed historical legacy written into Icon's superhero narrative, to the overt mastery of historical narratives performed by *Still I Rise*, the graphic novel has become a crucial space for creating a visible African American identity. Black graphic novels are a space for self-determined (in)visibility that complicates and examines the underlying problems within responses to the trope of invisibility. By maintaining an interest in historical figures and intervening into the African American historical archive, black graphic novels announce the lasting visibility of black humanity.

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[45] Asante and Mattson's project invokes a range of maps and cartographic representations to serve as accompaniment to an encyclopedic consideration of African American history see *The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans*.

[46] Portia James' *The Real McCoy: African-American Invention and Innovation, 1619-1930* and Cowan and Maguire's *Timelines of African-American History: 500 Years of Black Achievement* record notable African American inventors, providing the raw information that becomes inserted into the visual catalogs of *Still I Rise*.

However, within this construction, black graphic novels ultimately complicate the invisibility within African American history by refusing to construct easily self-determined identities. Black graphic novelists gain mastery of representations of black historical narratives and double-trope invisibility, while the imposed invisibility of African American history is offset by the emergent visibility of historic black figures. This increased visibility tends to imply new forms of invisibility or limitation, including a cultural and historical trope central to African American literature and culture. These graphic novels invoke competing forms of invisibility and visibility.

Conclusion

Responding to Michael Chaney

The creation of an African American literary tradition implies a black graphic novel tradition as well. Henry Louis Gates historicizes the emergence of an African American literary tradition within early slave narratives and their shared motifs and tropes, most notably the trope of the talking book (xxiii). Gates was not the first scholar to define African American literature against the broad field of American literature, but his research points to how scholars and critics can better understand the formation of a literary tradition through the specific literary traits endemic to a particular tradition. Just as Gates' Signifyin' describes the repetition with a difference he places at the heart of the African American literary imagination, the emerging body of black graphic novels likewise constructs intertextual connections through shared literary motifs and thematic concerns. Each of these graphic novels signifies on literary antecedents and motifs, thereby establishing the undercurrents of a black graphic novel aesthetic.

Yet scholars of both African American literature and graphic novels have eschewed definite statements about the viability, or even existence, of a black graphic novel tradition. Michael Chaney, whose works implies a connection between African American texts and their graphic novel counterparts, ironically maintains ambivalence about the establishment of such a tradition. Chaney's essay, "Is There an African American Graphic Novel?"[47] confronts this question directly, but in articulating a response to this question Chaney shies away from any definitive claims about a possible tradition. Chaney's essay details his personal experience incorporating graphic novels into undergraduate curriculum at Dartmouth, and the inevitable

[47] As mentioned earlier, Chaney's essay appears in the Modern Language Association's collection *Teaching the Graphic Novel*.

hesitancy with which students approach these materials as racially conscious literature ("Is There" 69-70). Chaney assigns canonical graphic novels such as *Maus* and *Watchmen* alongside *King, Birth of a Nation*, and McDuffie and Robert Washington's *Static Shock*, each one met with a level of incredulity and suspicion by his students. Chaney attempts to ameliorate these concerns by contextualizing black graphic novels within the concomitant tradition of racist and racializing visual traditions taken up by bell hook's *Art on My Mind*, Michael Harris' *Colored Pictures*, and Fredrik Stromberg's *Black Images in the Comics* (70-71). In Chaney's estimation each of these writers provide an important critical lens for considering the driving questions he uses to frame his special-topics course on graphic novels: "What can be gained from framing these texts as African American graphic novels…What can sequential art by these artists tell us about the relation between narrative and visual representation in making visible racial particularities?" (70).

Though Chaney admits that black graphic novels are linked to the historic traditions of African American culture and literature, he hesitates to call this the formation of a graphic novel tradition. In relation to how he frames discussions of *King* Chaney confesses that "a great deal of what we might call, with reservation, an African American graphic novel aesthetic riffs on a historical archive of racist visualization, I have found it useful to foreground aesthetic structures elaborated in various musical forms" (73). Chaney's graphic novel pedagogy focuses more on the cultural and historical context surrounding the production and creation of black graphic novels. The conclusion of Chaney's essay attempts to synthesize his overall claims about the particular traits of African American graphic novels, but nevertheless lacks specific support to be considered a viable statement on a black graphic novel tradition:

> Thus, we might say with some qualification that African American graphic novels emerge from an alchemy familiar to scholars of African American studies, in which the crude ore of marginalized feeling and imagination transforms into the precious metal of culturally meaningful art, language, and narrative (74).

Chaney gestures toward possible future studies that might highlight and explain these connections.

This study has attempted to illustrate the existence of an African American "black graphic novel aesthetic." Black graphic novels establish a shared process of Signifyin' akin to the textual formations outlined by Gates. Each of the novels included in this study maintain the repetition with a difference central to Gates' theory. Critics should embrace these shared cultural practices as evidence of an established black graphic novel tradition. Through the shared revision and embrace of slave portraiture, the trope of the talking book, and an interest in self-determined (in)visibility, the graphic novels included in this study provide the outline for understanding the qualities of a black graphic novel tradition. Each participates in the alchemic process described by Chaney, wherein African American literary traditions are transformed and re-constituted within the graphic novel ("Is There" 74). Each novel provides a unique perspective and revision of the shared elements of their visual signifyin' process. As such these novels construct a continuum of visual interpretation and remediation. At times their revision is more conservative or traditional, in the example of portraiture within *Still I Rise*. Other times this revision and assumption presses the boundaries of the form itself, as in the indeterminate talking book within *Nat Turner*. The diversity of these interpretations posits the likewise diversity of the black graphic novels. This does not detract from a consideration of a shared aesthetic, instead, this

quality deepens and enriches considerations of black graphic novels. Ultimately, these graphic novels provide evidence of a definitive aesthetic tradition. Though not conclusive, the process of visual Signifyin' outlined by these novels provides the foundation for further analysis of the aesthetic and thematic concerns specific to black graphic novels. By engaging with and revising African American literature, these graphic novels energize the tradition itself, signaling a new visual frontier for considering the legacies of race and representation.

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Appendix

Figure 1.1 Martin Luther King putting on his cross.
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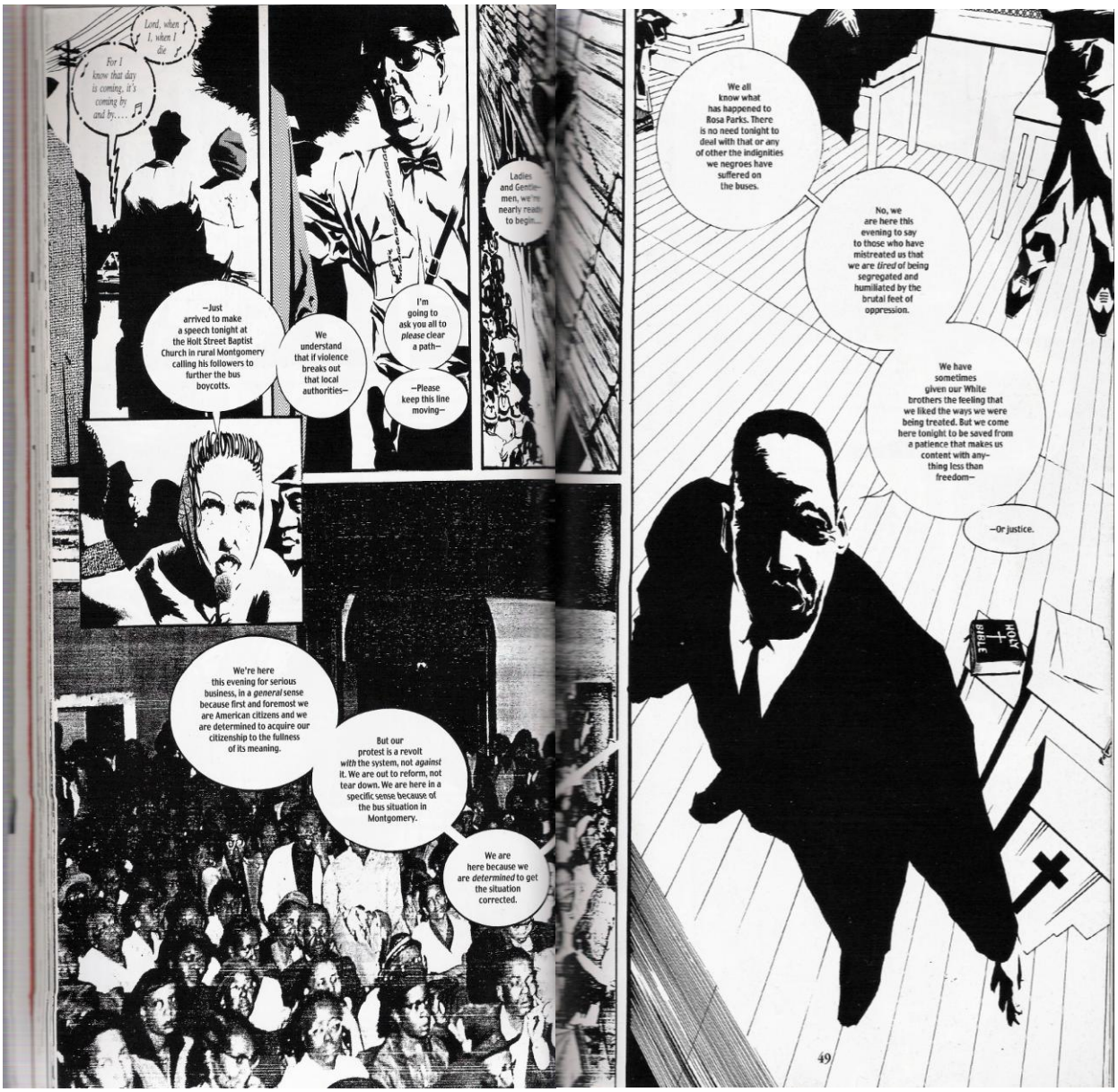

Figure 1.2 The Montgomery Bus Boycott.
Copyright © 2011 Ho Che Anderson; courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

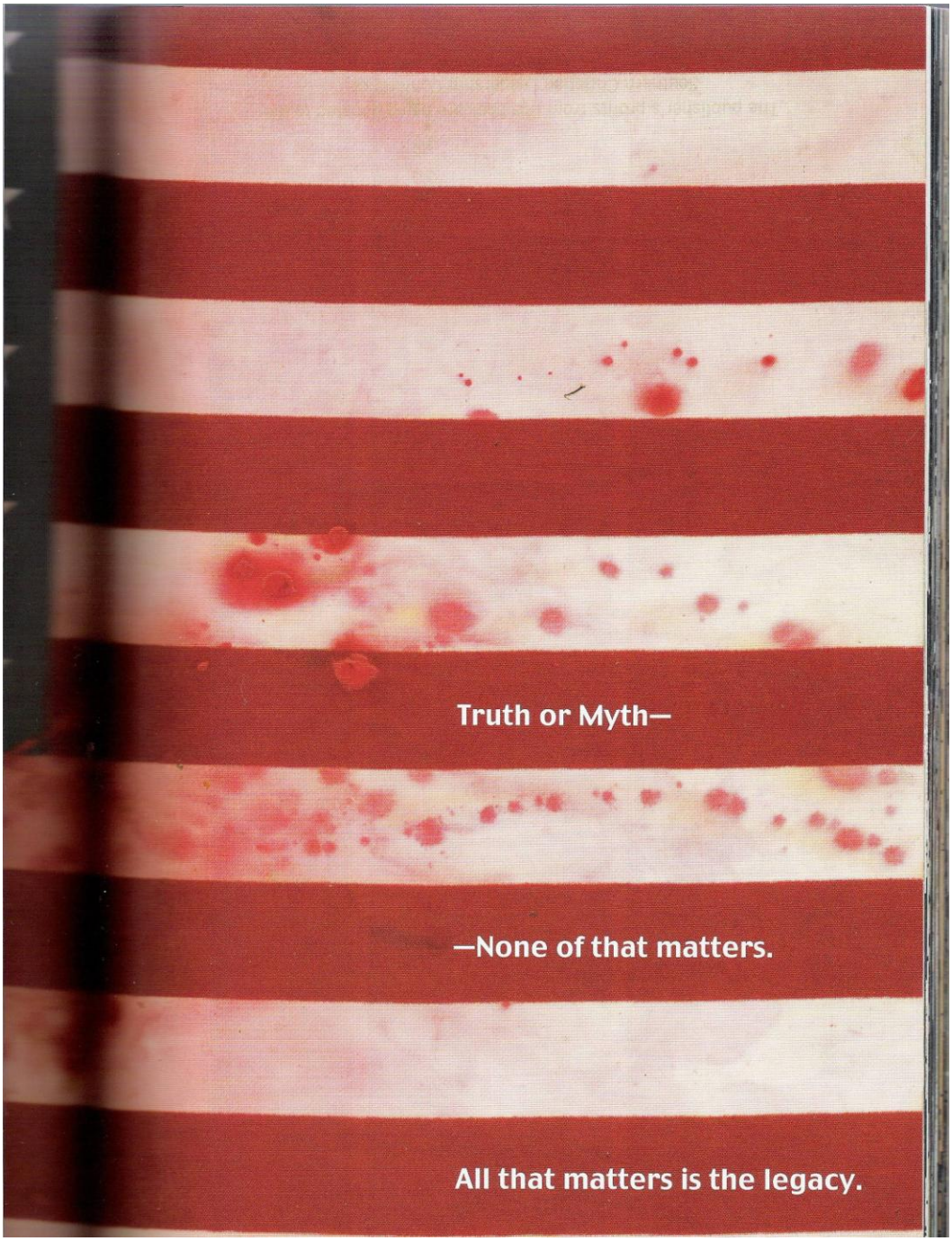

Figure 1.3 "All that Matters is the Legacy."
Copyright © 2011 Ho Che Anderson; courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

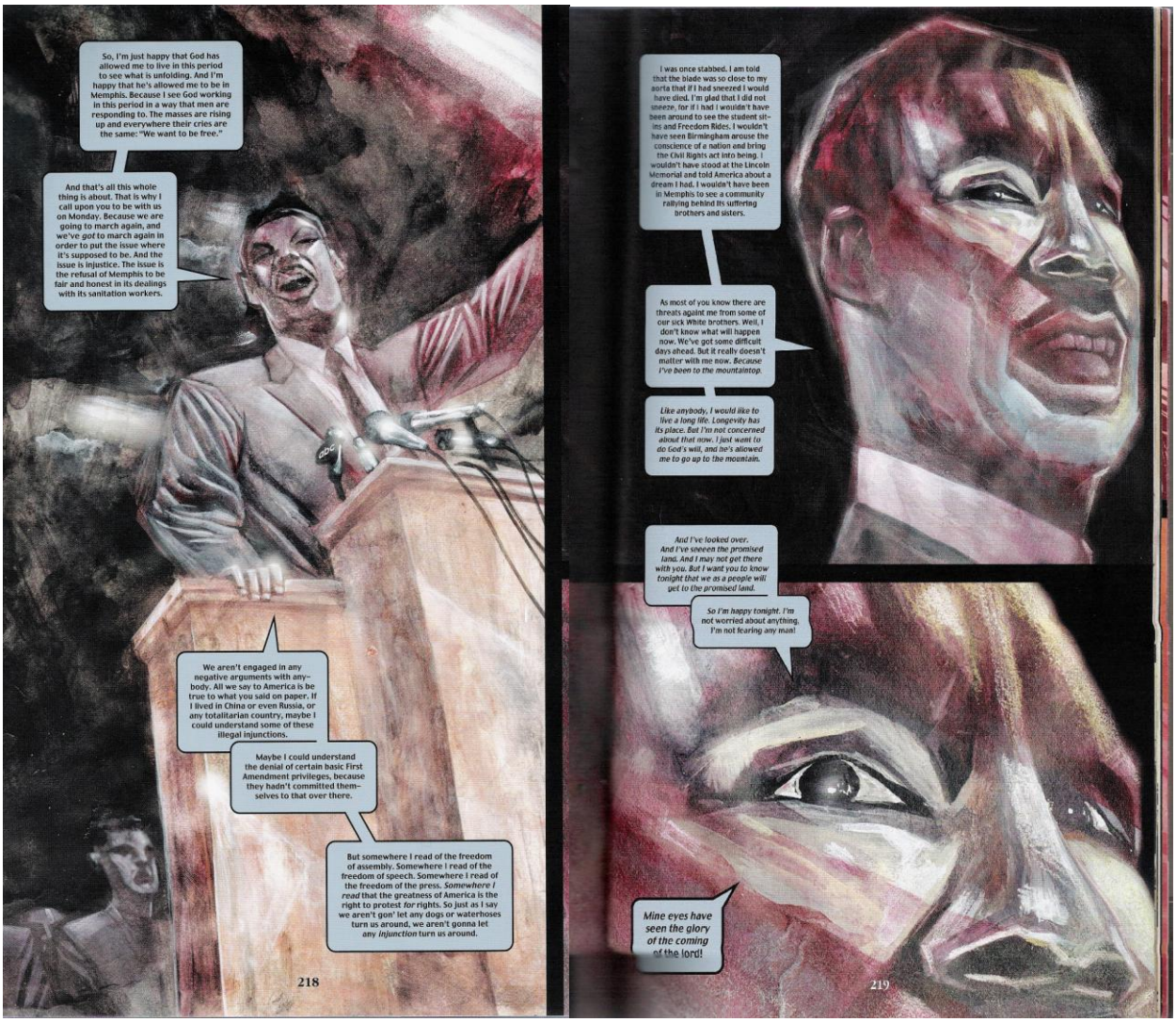

Figure 1.4 King's "I Have Seen the Mountaintop" Speech.
Copyright © 2011 Ho Che Anderson; Fantagraphics Books.

Figure 1.5 Turner's Hanging
Nat Turner © 2008, Kyle Baker
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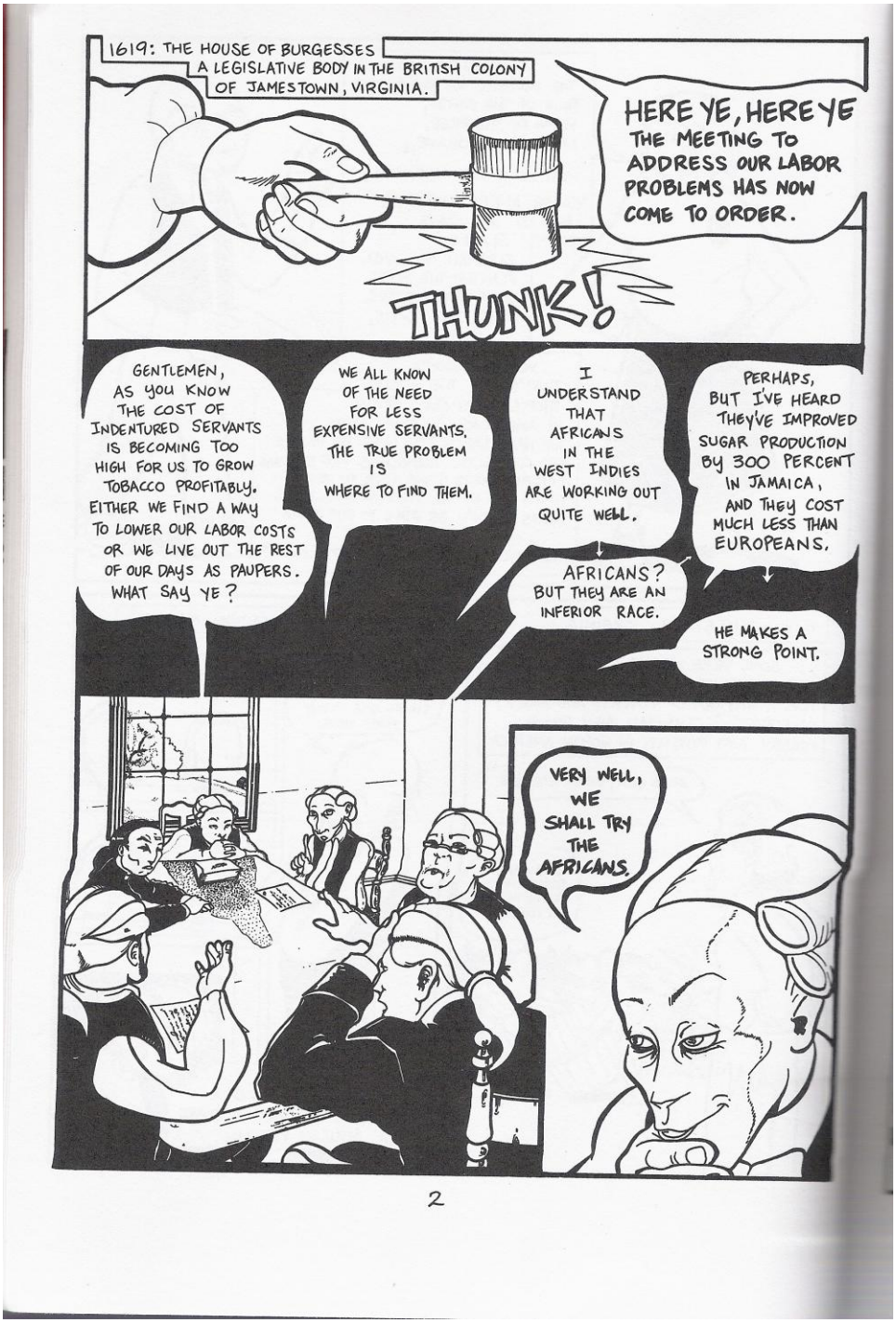

Figure 1.6 The House of Burgess inaugurate African enslavement.

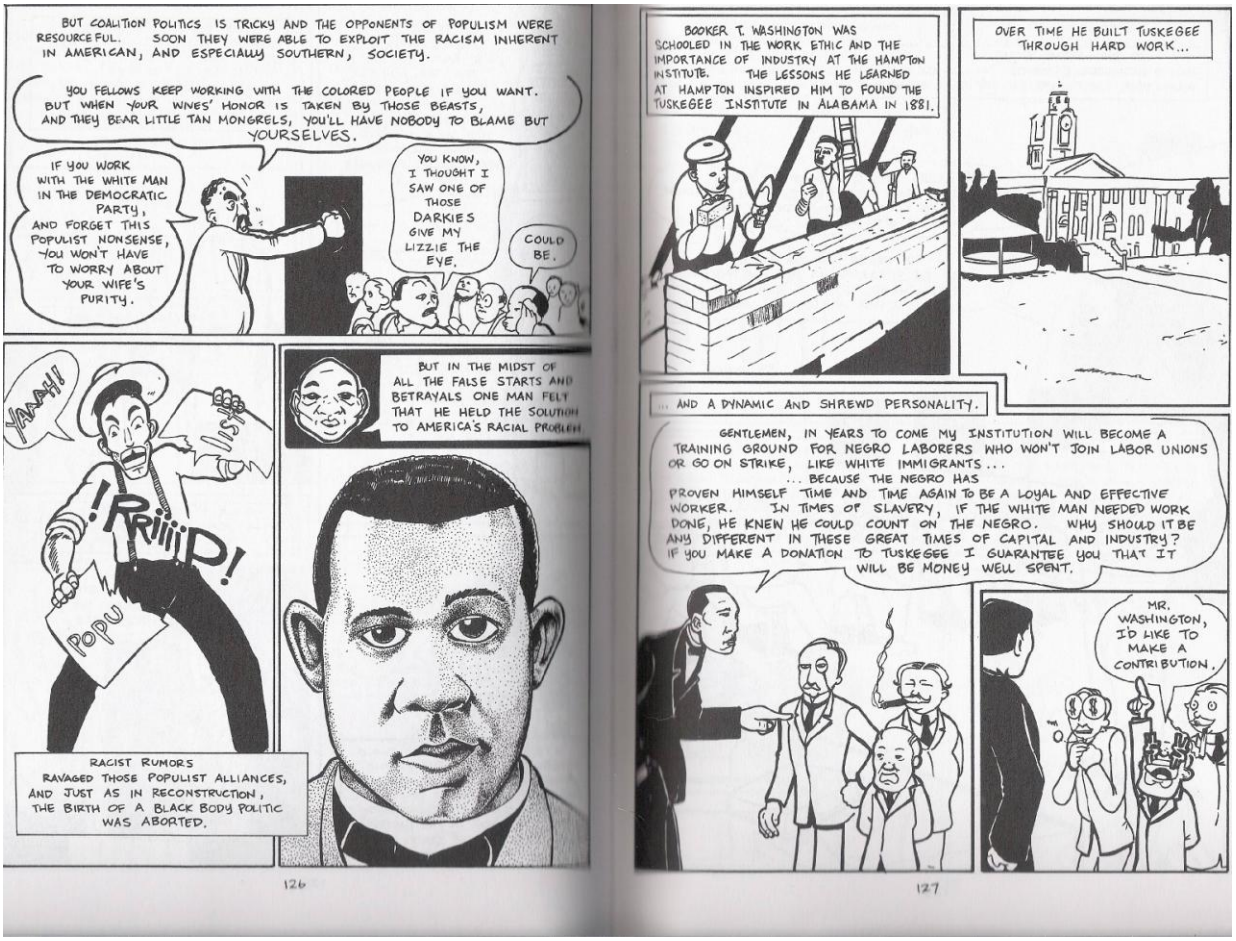

Figure 1.7 Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Experiment.

Figure 1.8 Obama's election completes *Still I Rise*

Figure 2.1 ***David Walker's Appeal*** **introduced.**

Figure 2.2 *David Walker's Appeal* leads to Nat Turner's revolt.

Figure 2.3 Icon's origin and legal profession.

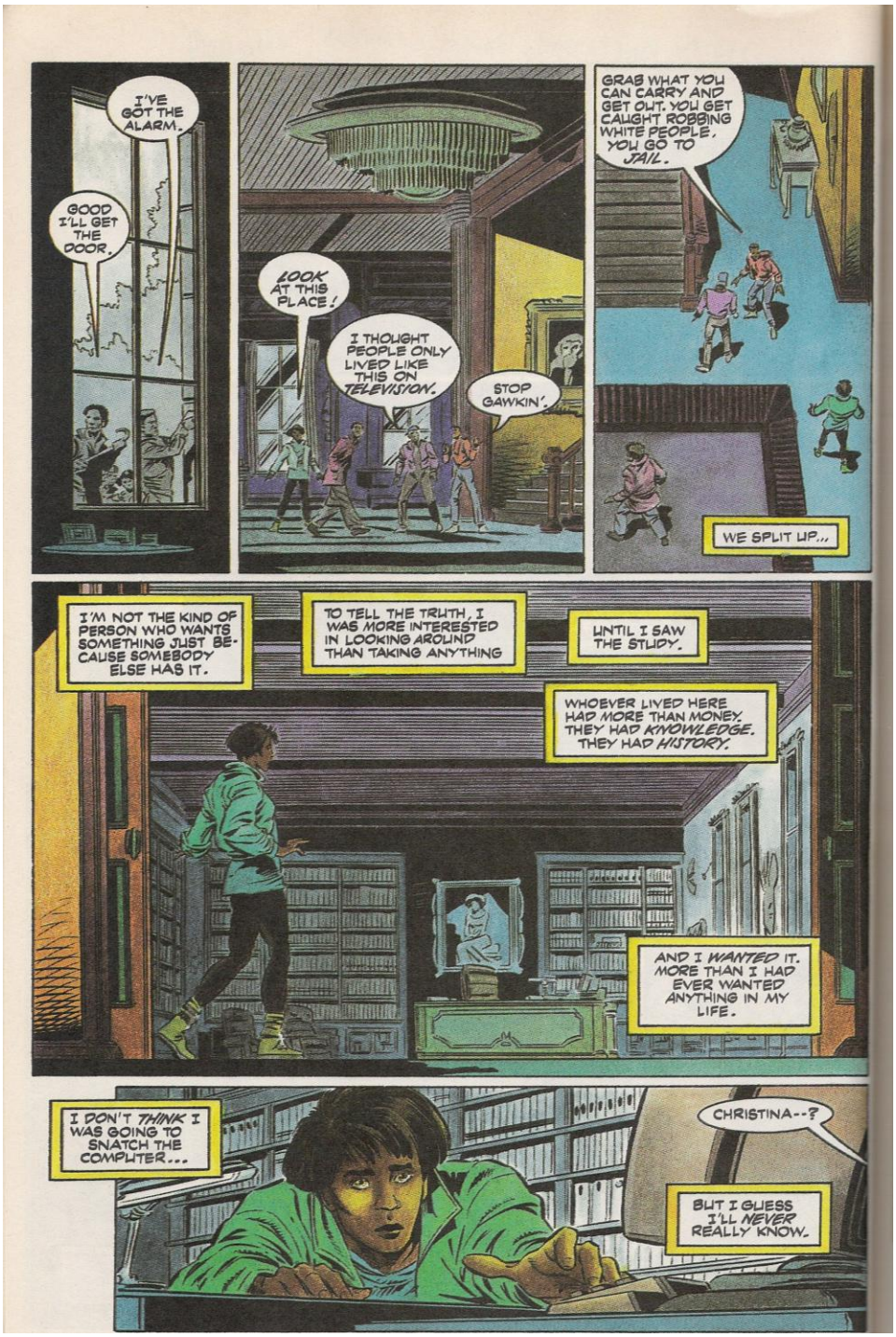

Figure 2.4 Raquel sees Icon's library.

Figure 2.5 Raquel finds inspiration for writing.

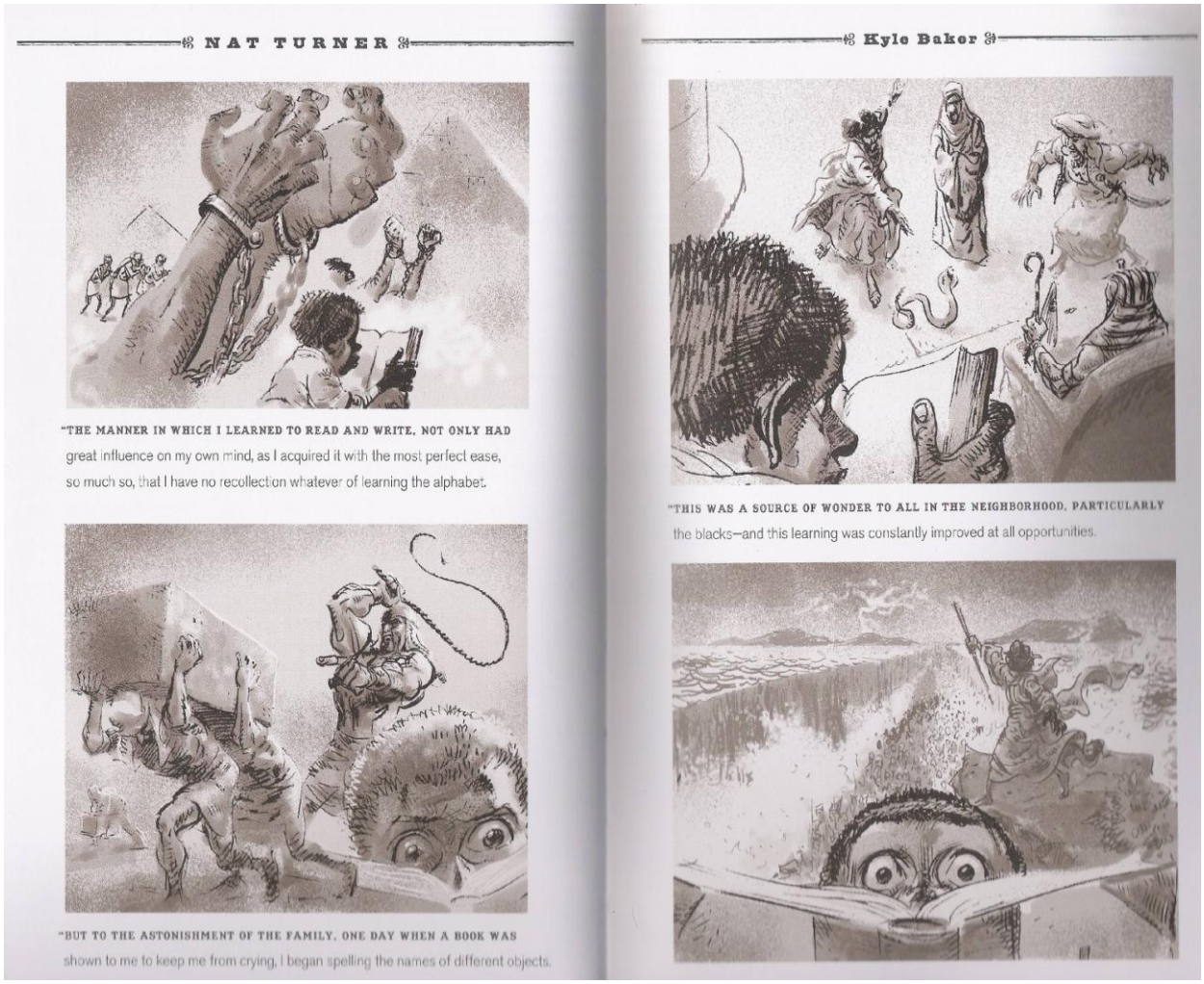

Figure 2.6 The young Turner imagines biblical stories.
Nat Turner © 2008, Kyle Baker
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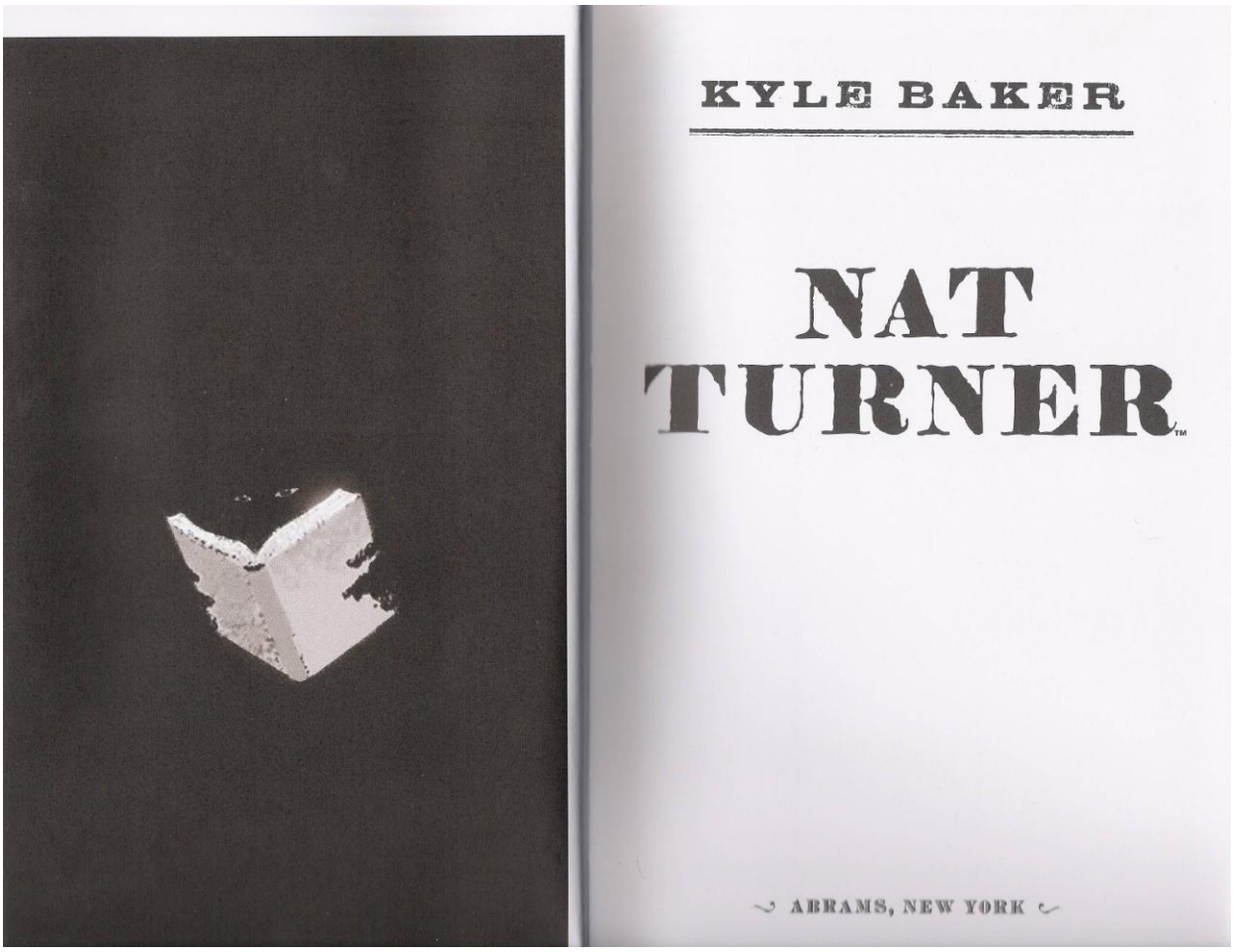

2.7 The opening graphic and title page of *Nat Turner*
Nat Turner © 2008, Kyle Baker
Published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. All rights reserved.

Figure 2.8 Turner's fractured body becomes a printed book.
Nat Turner © 2008, Kyle Baker
Published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. All rights reserved.

Figure 3.1 Icon's condensed personal history.

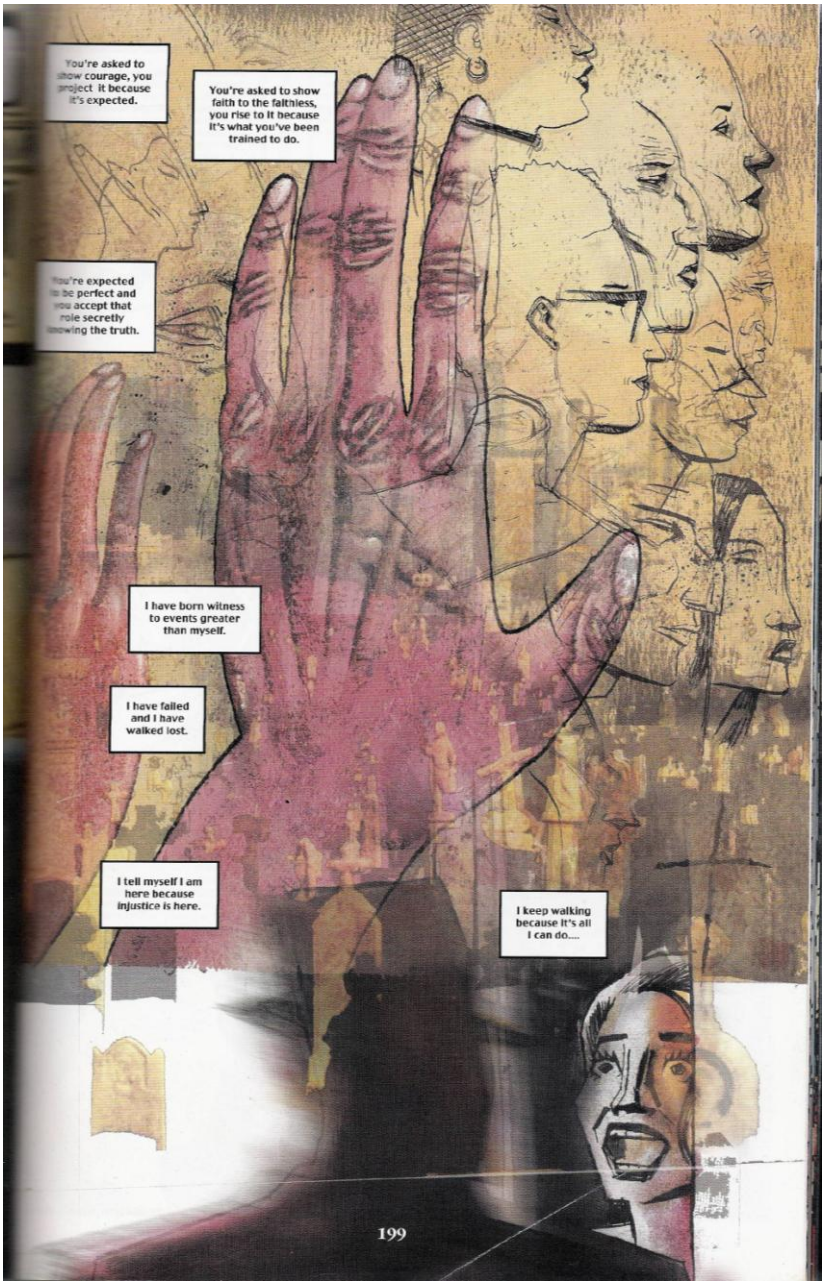

Figure 3.2 King contemplates his legacy
Copyright © 2011 Ho Che Anderson; Fantagraphics Books.

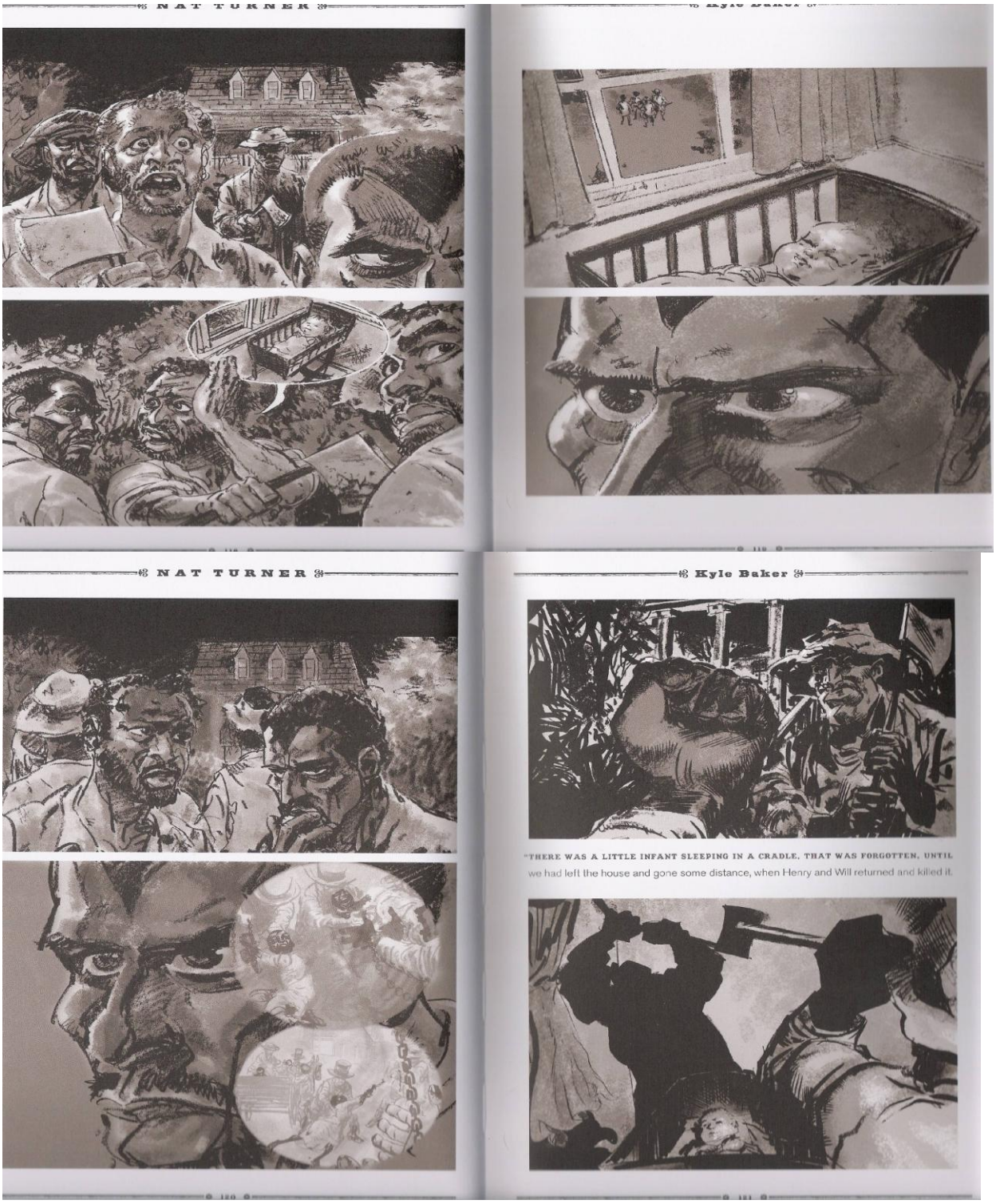

Figure 3.3 Turner contemplates killing an infant

Nat Turner © 2008, Kyle Baker
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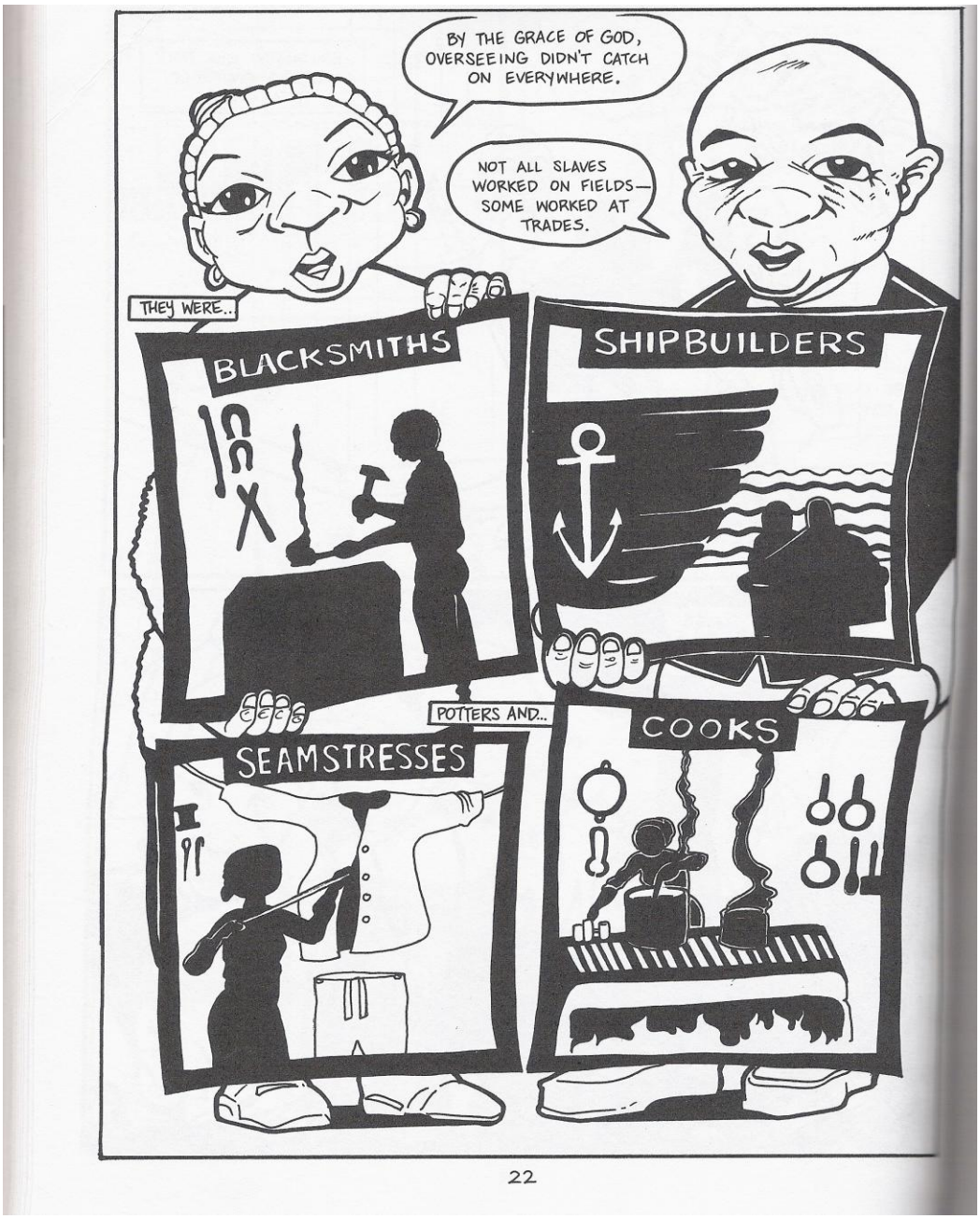

Figure 3.4 Black individuals' determination against slavery.

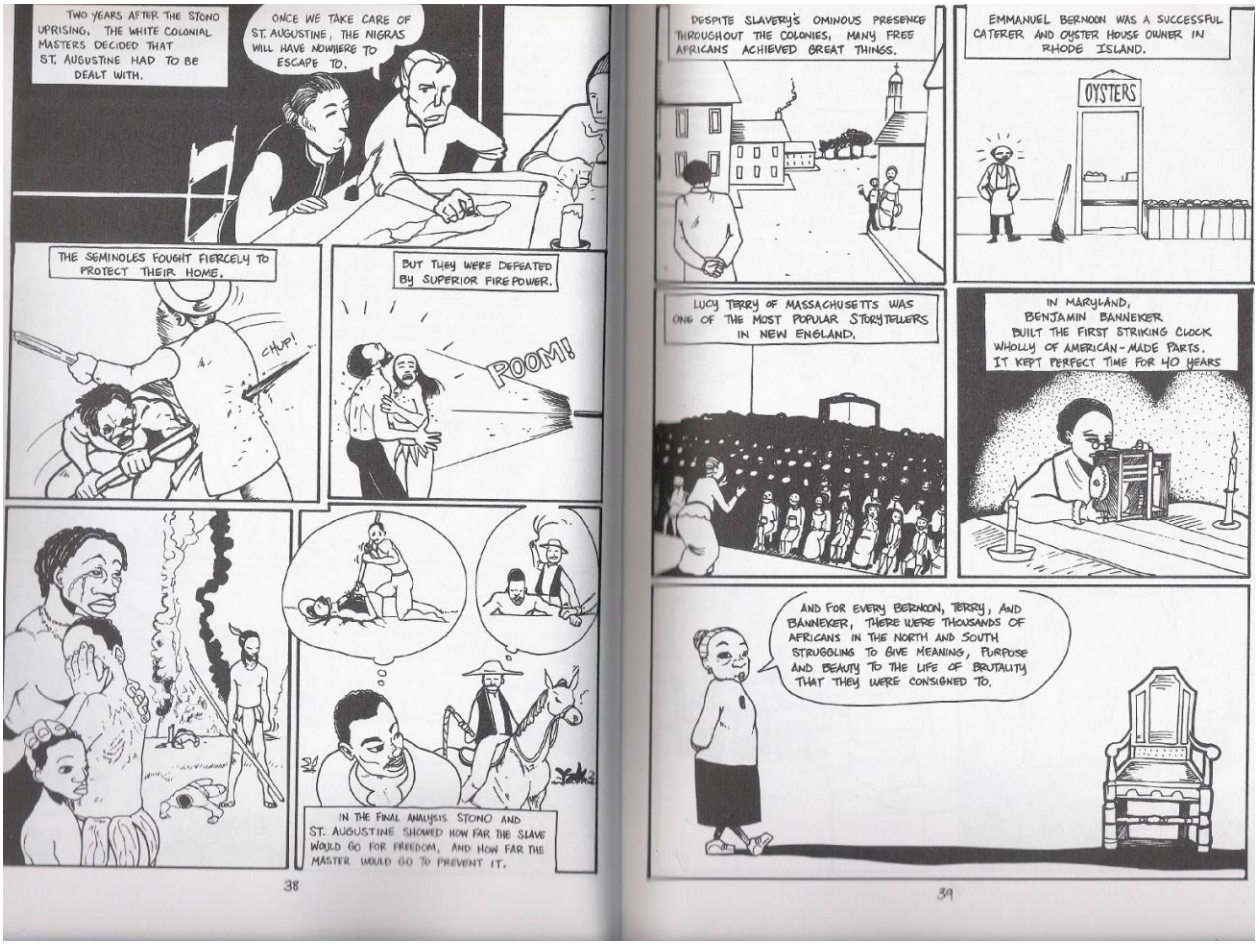

Figure 3.5 African American accomplishments responding to razing of St. Augustine.

Vita

Adam Coombs was born in Lexington, Kentucky April 3rd, 1987. He spent most of his formative years in Louisville, Kentucky, where he graduated from DuPont Manual High School before attending the University of Louisville. There he graduated summa cum laude with a degree in English and minors in Humanities and Pan-African studies. After graduation Adam married the love of his life, Karen Coombs, and the two moved to Knoxville, Tennessee where Adam was offered a position as a Graduate Teaching Associate. They both currently reside there with their dog, Zoe, and anticipate a move to Bloomington, Indiana where Adam will pursue his PhD.